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■ From the Notebooks of
Lionel Trilling

1987

Partisan Review 1

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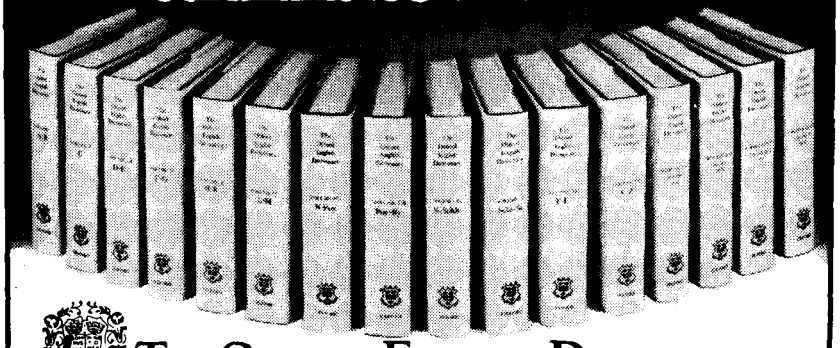

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FROM THE NOTEBOOKS OF LIONEL TRILLING, PART II

23 July [1952]

I hear on all sides of the extent of my reputation—which some even call "fame." In England it seems to be very considerable, and even in this country it is something, and in France there is some small trace etc. At Cambridge someone gave 3 lectures on me. I contemplate this with astonishment. It is the thing I have most wanted from childhood on—although of course in much greater degree—and now that I seem to have it I have no understanding whatever of its basis—of what it is that makes people respond to what I say, for I think of it as of a simplicity and of a naivete almost extreme.

[October 1952]

Parents' meeting at Dalton. An incredible cultural experience. The parents sit in the library and are told by the headmistress & selected teachers how wonderful the school is—with a lilt, a gleam, a sacred enthusiasm of dedication, never a hint of humility or possibility of error or failure. The parents are not invited to ask questions—at the end of the speeches the meeting is over. D. says no school could possibly be as bad as they make it seem. Next day we both wonder: what if the *parents* should speak of themselves in the same way?

Oct 1953

Discussing the restrictions of society at the time of Jane Austen, I spoke of modern mobility and the sense of possibility. One student objected, insisting on the limitations of society now. It seemed to me first that he was saying that there was no possibility of social movement, then that he was saying that there were only a given number of things a man could be in our society. Later, a friend of his came to see me; said that the first boy "as always" overstated the case—he would now like to state it. It was that in our society one had to be something; his friends knew that if they did not undertake one of the professions, they would be nothing but bums, so with great bitter-

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Editor's Note: These selections from Lionel Trilling's notebooks were made by Christopher Zinn.

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ness they undertook a respectable professional life. But what they wanted to be was "persons." With my generation, he said, it was very different.

Speaking of this to Diana: she, expectably, took a very dim view of it—referred to its psychological roots—went on to say, "Of course what they want to be is writers"—which of course is true—the boy referring to something I had said about "a Kansas girl going to Chicago" (if she had had trouble with the community at home) said "a writer doesn't speak in those generalities."

For the rewriting of my Penn. essay this is of the greatest importance—also for the novel—perhaps for the little one too.[1]

Aug 13 [1956?]

Speaking with D. of Norman Podhoretz's dilemma about E. E. C.[2]—he has no real connection with E., saw him only a very few times before going to work for *Commentary* and not at all since then, and yet he feels that he should remain until some time after E's return to sustain him against the Greenberg brothers[3]—I said that he was like Razumov in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*: he sits alone in his room, a quiet conservative young man, consciously so, and consciously, if I remember correctly, a lover of his country and a supporter of the state; and in walks a revolutionary fleeing from the police and claiming his help and protection—there is nothing for him to do but to give what is asked, and we feel that there *is* nothing. D. recalled that years ago Mark Van Doren spoke of this book, or perhaps it was the moving picture, and said that all through it he had me in mind—it seemed to him that such a fate could easily befall me. And this is true, and has proved itself true.

[1956?]

My habit of telling tailors at a certain point in a friendly conversation that my father was a tailor. They do not like this, they ignore it, they do not want to serve the sons of tailors, they want to serve gentlemen—professors.

8 March [1957]

Norman & Steven[4] call on D. D's account of their conversation—sex—Don Juanism is what they say they want—Norman: "I ask myself

[1] This probably refers to novels he has in mind.

[2] Elliot E. Cohen, the editor of *Commentary*, has been away ill.

[3] Clement and Martin Greenberg.

[4] Steven Marcus.

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Is this what I suffered my adolescence for?" etc—Their statement that all my work preaches renunciation—Norman's *New Leader* piece is in effect an accusation that I did this.

[1957?]

From a note I made some two years ago on a conversation with Robert Pack about his poems:

Although they are not really very good, they have been accepted for publication by Scribners (J. H. Wheelock). They surprised me by their mildness, their lack of "tension," "irony," intensity. It was this that I spoke of to him, although I did not at first use these words—I did not praise them: I began at once by say[ing] what I thought should happen in his poems as he will write them. I found myself telling him in effect that he was being too good a person to write poetry—that there was no *malice* in his poetry—that perhaps some malice, some expression, some hostility, and the mask for these, were needed by the poet—that he was trying to take his good sensitive middle class life and communicate its perceptions and emotions directly—I saw him living in *such* willed graceful amity with his mother and his wife—I said that one needs the devil to make art, the ambiguity that the diabolical induces—How wrong Thomas Mann is in his opposition of the bourgeois & the artist! We make it the gross Philistine bourgeois as vs the artist. But maybe these two have something in common—the real opposition is rather between the artist and the sensitive moral bourgeois. Story here.

[1960?]

To go into a group of psychoanalysts is to have the impression of men who have castrated themselves in the interests of their art. They seem to intend to signify that they have no sexual intentions whatever. And also that they have no intellectual aggression whatever. All professional groups probably make this impression, but with psychoanalysts it is especially striking. "In the interests of their art": the sexual harmlessness they display is in part intended to reassure, in part the result of the neutrality they no [doubt] *must* practice.

[1960?]

On Norman Podhoretz's essay on Huck Finn and his objection to my attitude to its view of "civilization"—to my defense of civilization—Huck as "nature" according to NP—but he has no lust, no aggression, no natural *force*—he is nature as harmlessness & innocence.

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[1960?]
Joyce the *simplest* of all modern writers. He has no *ideas* about anything, none whatever, not about society, or about morality, or about god, scarcely even about religion. He believes in goodness & sweetness & there the matter ends. Yes, of course: art.

[1961]
Intelligent—the large beautiful word that means you do not really count intellectually but in a quite decent and impressive way. William Phillips is called intelligent. So is Philip Rahv. So is Fred Dupee. When Norman Podhoretz wants to praise me and at the same time say that my ideas don't matter, he calls me "the most intelligent man in the country."

3 July [1961]
—Death of Ernest Hemingway. Except Lawrence's 32 years ago, no writer's death has moved me as much.—who would suppose how much he has haunted me? How much he existed in my mind—as a reproach? He was the only writer of our time I envied. I respected him in his most foolish postures and in his worst work (except *The Old Man and the Sea*).

This morning I was to finish my comment on "Out of the Cradle"[5]—all that remained to do was conclude with the reference to Henry James's "So here it is at last, the distinguished thing!"

Referring to H's father's suicide at 56, I said "Perhaps this was the act of courage he was facing all his life" & D: "Perhaps the act of courage he was facing all his life was to stay alive."

[1961]
The great fact of modern life—the politicization of desire. What was once expressed in, say[,] pastoral poetry, is now expressed at the polls or by the Praesidium.

[1962?]
Sartre's *Les Mots* is the best book I have read in a long time—the only book I have wanted to talk about with enthusiasm—I might say that it is the only book I have read with admiration in the last five or six years.

---

[5]Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," included in *The Experience of Literature.*

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Nothing has so filled me with shame and regret at what I have not done.

[1962?]

The second volume of Camus' notebooks makes the same effect on me as the first—boredom and depression because of the sense that this mind is like my own except that it does not fear to be histrionic, to "see itself" and to impose itself. The dullness of its wish to be virtuous, and to show that it is virtuous. . . .

[1963]

"Criticism is the adventure of a soul among masterpieces."
Adventure: a word used by comfortable, habitual men to permit them the illusion that some part of their existence is free and courageous.
Soul: If one believed there was such a thing, one did not name it this lightly, as if one thought that the church music of Saint-Saëns expressed a truly religious mode.
Masterpieces: typical of the self-important humanism of the 19th century: it has in mind an *artist* who *achieves*, no doubt by *struggle* or *toil*, one or another *great* work; it proposed a hierarchy of grandiosity in the arts and it pretty clearly implied that only the best is good enough for *us*.

[1963]

Seven years old—in bed ill—my mother enters, leading a group of children; they are older than me, seemed of another generation, and, really, of another order of being, in part because they are not Jews. This is very subtle, because there was no overt sense of anti-Semitism in my family, or, rather, there was a principled determination to ignore its possibility so long as possible. I had played with them a few times, our game being a rather elaborate snow-battle with a fort. All was snow outside as they entered in outdoor clothing, glowing with the cold. They stood at the door, not to be infected. They were enormously self-possessed, as it were armored in good intention. I recall a boy-leader, godlike to me in beauty and authority, and a girl, bold & boylike. They had come to tell me that I was missed, and that in my absence they had elected me "captain." Enchanted, overwhelmed, embarrassed by their kindness, I did not believe this, knowing it to be a lie told to cheer me up. I imagine that I did not respond well out of embarrassment. I imagine too that I suffered some disappointment when I returned to play and found that I was, of course, not captain and could not have exercised leadership.

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(Reading the "Swallows and Amazons" books to Jim,[6] these children seemed to me much like those in the books.)

[1964]

Did any of Freud's patients ever confront him with a radically different conception of society and morality than the one he had? Was he not always more sceptical about convention and respectability than any of the people he treated, at the same time that, etc.? This cannot be said for any analyst of today—their social views must often be challenged, especially by the young.

[1965]

A man, "sensitive," "highly developed," has committed some act of a very bad kind, perhaps having large consequences to many people. One waits to discover the effects of this on him as the years go by. *There are none.* He lives a happy "useful" life. An anti-*Lord Jim.* The act has no consequences.

[1965?]

I went to a departmental meeting at 4, passed The Paperback Forum, saw its window with a large photograph of me and a display of my books. I left the meeting at 5:20, passed the Pab Forum, saw its window without my photograph, a display of books not mine.

[1966?]

Recollection: Coming to an afternoon party—for Rebecca West—at B. W. Huebsch's.[7] This was to be my first meeting with the Viking people after they had read my novel. The embarrassed silence of all of them. Covici[8] in a state of misery, said yes they would publish it: but not another word.—Reb. West, whom I was meeting for the first time, told me how fine *Matthew Arnold* was and quoted some well-known literary personage to the same effect (who was that? or was he himself there?)—The party given for me by the Vikings on the book's publication, their continued embarrassment. Their rude indifference to my guests. Their amused surprise in telling me that an English publisher admired the book and had bought it. Fred Warburg[9] now tells me that when he made an offer for the book Huebsch

---

[6]James Trilling.

[7]Ben Huebsch, the head of Viking Press.

[8]Pascal Covici, Trilling's editor at Viking Press.

[9]Of Secker and Warburg, Trilling's British publisher.

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laughed at him and said that obviously he was offering for this dud because he hoped to get something else cheaper by doing so.

[1966 or 1967]

Whether or not the artist derives his powers from neurosis, he certainly derives them from a species of insanity, from megalomania, from his absurd belief in his own myth. This is what accounts for the achievement of Mailer and Bellow and even Malamud. They believe they are great men, they insist on being the center of their universes: all revolves around them. To impose, to impose: this is their single aim; it acts as a real thing, although it arises out of the absurdity. I defeated myself long ago when I rejected the way of chutzpah and mishagass in favor of reason and diffidence.

[1966 or 1967]

On the subway to Brooklyn early one morning last week: at one of the furthest Manhattan stations: a man entered and sat opposite me: he was extremely short, not so short as to be called a dwarf, but so short that one saw him with surprise: he was dressed in what seemed a child's snow suit, but no doubt it was a skiing costume, light blue: the hood of the parka was up, zipped firmly around his face; it was peaked; he carried on his lap a briefcase: the face was very strange: at first I thought it a very old woman's face: then that of a rather younger man: my first thought was that it was the face of another time than this—that one saw once but no longer faces of that color (gray), shape, and expression. Then it came to me that he closely resembled my father—the same broad nose, the same color, the same folding of the flesh, cheek-bones, the same tension of self-concern but even more obsessive. He often closed his eyes for minutes. He stared straight ahead otherwise, sitting motionless. I thought "A portent," and at once dismissed this as too literary: yet it was portentous. I searched in my mind for the literary reference: Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* meeting the red-headed man: death. Certainly this man was an image of death, as I remembered my father being.

12 Dec [1967]

Today a sudden recollection of the pleasure I had as a child in living in a world predominantly non-Jewish; it was not, in the main, thought of as a hostile world, although it was fairly resistant and it was this that made it attractive and *real*. I recall my non-Jewish teachers with more interest and affection than my Jewish ones, of whom there were few, and it seems to me that I thought of the Gen-

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tiles as having more reality than the Jews. This I am still likely to feel, that non-Jews are more "real" than Jews, in whom I am likely to see a generic factitiousness. — I liked the non-Jewish holidays. Did I at any time feel "ashamed" of being Jewish? Disadvantaged sometimes, but never ashamed.

[1968]

Aging

When one suspects that the dentist is doing jobs on one's teeth less arduous and expensive than he would have done some years earlier out of the considerate sense that more exacting and costly work would not be fair to undertake. . . .

18 March 1969

Yesterday at the meeting of the Faculty of Columbia College a man name of Holtzman, an assistant professor of chemistry, proposed a resolution which would admit to voting membership in the Faculty all teaching personnel of the College, from preceptor up. (I think this would more than double the present number of the Faculty.) He spoke of the "humiliation" of those who taught courses and who had no voice and no vote. (His proposal was that anyone who taught *one* course would be eligible for membership.) I rose to speak against the resolution, my line of attack being directed to the idea of "humiliation." What I said was incoherent and pointless. I was overcome by diffidence and embarrassment and could not make any cogent formulation. The occasion was the nadir of my present sense of intellectual impotence, of my not being in control of my mind: of the approach of old age.

To-night I read some essays of 5-6-7 years ago and was struck by their power.

[1970?]

To take account of how, in later life, those who are close to one find it impossible to respond to anything one has published. They cannot give praise, nor can they express disagreement. All recognition that one has done anything at all, that one *exists* in a professional way, must come from strangers. It has been many years since any friend has made a comment on anything I have written, even, I can say, a comment directed to being courteous or cheering. Not one of my friends showed the least interest in my Norton lectures, to which the response of strangers was so strong. (Exception: Jack Thompson spoke warmly to me of *Exp Lit* and *Beyond Culture*.)

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[1970?]

Writing for P.R. — the period of *response.*

[1970]

Kim — read first at age 12-13 in Ralph Rose's[10] red lining-leather copy. Kadushin[11]: tells me it is *important* — with genuine seriousness — but when, after a service at S.A.J.[12] I stop him to ask what its "philosophy is" he snubs me, having to talk to some impt member of the congregation — as always, he disappoints — How often have I read the book! "Taught" it for some yrs. (in Sem. with J. B.[13] — Cultural Crit.) — It is always new — always disclosing more. — Reading it in summer of '70 — age 65!!! — it seems to me one of the most *beautiful* books ever written — when I spoke of it in my essay on R. K. I remarked on the number of Kim's fathers — now what strikes me is how many men (women also) want Kim for a son — the theme of the *desired son* — where else dealt with — the loved one — Little Friend of all the World.

[1970?]

The review of *Civ. & Its Discontents* that I wrote for the *New Freeman* in which I dismissed the book as absurd. I was saved by the collapse of the N. F. The review went into galleys and they may exist.

20 July [1974]

How cruel the unconscious can be! Last night a long sweet dream in which it was arranged — by whom? — that there was to be "a new start" — I was or was to be back at college and now I was to make every effort and I was to be given every help to really accomplish something that I had not accomplished before — the learning of a language, French or German, really well, perfectly. How lovely it was to be so certain that all could be accomplished, that the past could be revised, the future made as it should be. What a fragrant freshness filled my life — it could not have been a sweeter dream. Then I passed to a new phase (did I awake and go into a hypnogogic state?) in which slowly, carefully, logically it was disclosed to me that all this was illusion, that there was no magic in the learning of a

[10]A childhood friend.

[11]Rabbi Max Kadushin, who prepared Trilling for his bar mitzvah.

[12]Society for the Advancement of Judaism.

[13]Jacques Barzun.

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language, that it not only required pains to be taken but *time* and that there wasn't, for me, enough time. . . .

20 July [1974]
Conversation after the completion of the background paper for the 18 July Seminar[14]—situation much the same as in Oxford—help needed—or never again writing on public subjects—deterioration of my style in direction of inflatedness and portentousness—a similar loss of simplicity in my social manner—"histrionic"—that I should turn to fiction for a time—to restore a sense of actuality. . . .

[1974]
Lillian Hellman: Her adoration of the ideal of friendship expressed itself in the communication of the faults or secrets of one friend to another friend. Just after (i.e. 3 hours) writing the note about L. H. D read an excerpt from Hiram Hayden's autobiography (in *The Am. Scholar*) in which Hayden speaks of a meeting of a committee to form a left-wing popular organization to which Harlow Shapley, a moving spirit and a thoroughgoing Stalinist, comes bringing two uninvited guests, Jo Davidson & L. H., who take part in the deliberations which are intended to lead to the selection of a chairman for the organization being formed. Hayden proposes John Dewey. His description of Lillian's smile at this.
A greatly underdepreciated woman.

[1974]
One wakes in the morning eager to begin the day—to see the *Times* that will confirm one's sense of beginning, how dismayed if it's not there, the creeping disgust that comes over one when it is there and one has spent a few minutes with it—all that can save the situation is a significant obituary.

[January 1975]
A curious day—after lunch went to the Impressionist show with D and Aileen Ward. The pictures marvellous, so far as we could see them because of the vast crowd—beauty's last gasp—appetite: one wants to eat them. . . .

[1975]
The effort of the bourgeoisie to assert its dignity—to take this into account in any consideration of the humanistic tradition. . . . To

[14]At the Aspen Institute for the Humanities.

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associate this with my idea of Wordsworth's concern with *valuation*— "property." Art a kind of aggression—an assault made upon us—the old (e.g. 19th cent) assumption was that the assault was made upon mature, already shaped persons who were able to resist or contain it—not upon adolescents.

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Lewis P. Simpson

LIONEL TRILLING AND THE AGENCY OF TERROR

My subject is a large and difficult one, Lionel Trilling's quest for vocation. If my remarks on it seem to bear an informal, even at times a personal quality, this is owing to two circumstances. One is that, although I did not know Trilling personally, for close to forty years he has been a part of my life as a teacher, historian, and editor in the field of American letters. The other circumstance is that I did know Trilling's older contemporary, Allen Tate (1889–1979), with whom I shall seek to bring Trilling (1905–1975) into a certain degree of relationship. Assuming the privilege of personal interest, I should add, I will not consider the whole Trilling canon; omitting the famous study of Matthew Arnold (1939), my concern will be with the books that came in the 1950s and after. My sense of obligation to Trilling goes back to the time when, following my completion of the tedious and lengthy process of intimidation called getting a Ph.D., I began, though always to be confined to the campus, to try to get an education I might certify as my own. The books I think of most particularly are: *The Liberal Imagination* (1950); *The Opposing Self* (1955); *Beyond Culture* (1965); *Sincerity and Authenticity* (the Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1970, published in 1972); and *Mind in the Modern World* (the inaugural Jefferson Lecture of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1972, published in pamphlet form the same year). But I shall here refer in any detail only to *The Liberal Imagination* and *The Opposing Self*. My orienting, if not altogether major, emphasis will be on a work by Trilling not until recently known publicly, the selection from his notebooks for the years 1927–1951, as compiled by Christopher Zinn and published in the fiftieth anniversary issue of *Partisan Review* (Vol. LI, #4, 1984). So far as I am aware I attribute a larger significance to the notebooks than other students of Trilling.

Editor's Note: This essay was first presented as a lecture at the University of Southwestern Louisiana on April 24, 1986, in honor of Professor Milton H. Rickels on the occasion of his retirement from the English faculty, under the auspices of the Flora M. Levy Endowment of the University.

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On the surface Tate and Trilling appear to be opposites: a Southerner who was one of the authors of the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (a title, incidentally, that both Robert Penn Warren and Tate deplored, and for which Warren wanted to substitute "Tracts Against Communism"); a New York Jew, who in the time of the Agrarians was involved with the American Marxist movement. It is not surprising that, although Tate and Trilling had in common a connection with the Kenyon School of Letters in John Crowe Ransom's time at Kenyon College and as well engaged in some personal correspondence, there was no point in their careers when they had more than an incidental personal relationship. But the connection that exists between them in the literary and cultural history of their age is deeper. It goes back at least to the late 1930s, when Trilling's *Matthew Arnold* (1939) and Tate's novel *The Fathers* (1938) were, for American literary intellectuals anyway, current events. In March 1939 his close friend John Peale Bishop wrote to Tate that he was reading Trilling's *Matthew Arnold*, which, says Bishop, "stinks." A letter from Tate to Bishop a little later mentions a review Trilling had done of Tate's novel *The Fathers (Partisan Review*, Vol. VI, #1, 1938). Tate says he likes the comment "as well as I could like any Marxist view." Actually Tate did not so cavalierly dismiss the review. Among the most penetrating notices *The Fathers* received, it observes how Tate, "a traditionalist in his literary as well as his social preference," has created a "fable" of violence within "the limitations of strictest form" through his delicate control of the tone of his story and suggests a fundamental tension in Tate between a desire to refer social order to an explicit societal code—"under which people . . . live by a culture and not by a morality"—and his recognition of the possibility that the society of the Old South destroyed itself from "lack of mind." This interpretation hit home, getting at a problematical situation in Tate's vision of order that he not only failed effectively to refute in a reply to Trilling's review of *The Fathers* (*Partisan Review*, Vol. VI, #2, 1939), but would in fact never resolve. Tate might have been more convincing in his response if, in spite of his admission that Trilling's was the "ablest and most interesting" analysis of *The Fathers*, he had not had the fixed idea that Trilling was a doctrinaire Marxist. This, more than the merits of the subtle argument about the character of *The Fathers*, directed Tate's attitude toward Trilling. His unduly narrow perception of Trilling's politics was compounded, furthermore, by a rather acute disdain for the academic man of letters. In the same letter to Bishop in which he mentions Trilling's review, Tate

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also remarks on something Trilling had just written about Hemingway. That is, he declares, "foully written," adding "But when you get the English Department mentality combined with the Marxian dialectic, the result is a Y.M.C.A. secretary."

The bantering tone of Tate's depreciation of Trilling tends to mark an antipathy to English departments so firm (though not so inflexible as Edmund Wilson's) that for years only economic necessity forced Tate onto the campus for temporary stints of teaching; not until 1951 did Tate form a permanent association with a university, this with the English Department of the University of Minnesota, where he was eventually given tenure and the eminence of a chair.

Ironically Tate's objections to Trilling either on the political or academic counts were far wide of the mark. Compared, say, to the commitment of some of his associates who considered themselves to be "fellow travellers," Trilling's attraction to the New York brand of communism in the 1930s was superficial, marked more by his inability to become a true believer than by commitment to the cause. As a matter of fact, by the end of the first half of the decade of the thirties, as a notebook entry for June 13, 1936, shows, Trilling felt that he had freed himself from the "linear method that has irritated me in my reviewing for so long."

> Going through change of life and acquiring a new dimension. Principally a sense that I do not have to prove anything finally and everlastingly. A sense of life—of the past and present. Am no longer certain that the future will be a certain—Marxian—way. No longer measure all things by linear Marxian yardstick. But this is symbolic. A new emotional response to all things.

If anything, Trilling's commitment to the academic pursuit of letters and learning was less convinced than his subscription to a political doctrine. Although in outward appearance Trilling had a long lasting and harmonious connection with Columbia—where he acquired an awesome reputation as the occupant first of the George Edward Woodberry chair and later as the occupant of the still more distinguished seat of University Professor—and although he never seems to have imagined himself outside the academic life, or for that matter, outside Columbia, Trilling was always a doubting, at times recalcitrant, resident of the campus. In truth the published excerpts from his notebooks demonstrate that for a long time he was appre-

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hensive that the university would be the damnation of his talent and that indeed he was never more than partially reconciled to the academic profession. For a number of years, the notebook entries indicate, he excused his employment as an instructor in English at Columbia on the basis of economic expediency: teaching was something he was doing "in order to get started on my work of writing." Yet as early as 1933 Trilling was bitterly accusing himself of violating his own motive. He records that he has seen a "crazy letter" Hemingway sent to Clifton Fadiman. Written when Hemingway "was drunk," Trilling says, the letter is "self-revealing, arrogant, scared, trivial, absurd." Nevertheless, he declares, it shows "how right such a man is compared to the 'good minds' of my university life—how he will produce and mean something to the world . . . how his life which he could expose without dignity and which is anarchic and 'childish' is a better life than anyone I know could live, and right for his job. And how far-far-far I am going from being a writer—how less and less I have the material and the mind and the will." The entry ends on a note of almost despairing prophecy: "A few-a very few—more years and the last chance will be gone." The pathos of his half-patronizing yet anguished jealousy of Hemingway's life as a freelance novelist is enhanced when we realize the force of the term "dignity" in Trilling's lament. Even though he was still in his twenties, Trilling did not have, and had never had, the Bohemian option of "exposing" his life "without dignity"—of writing a letter when he was drunk, or even of getting drunk. For one thing, he came from the discipline of the middle-class Jewish culture of New York City, a heritage not necessarily more repressive but far more closely structured than that of the boy from Oak Park, Illinois. Another, and, I conceive, more conclusive, reason why Trilling could not go with the Bohemian option was that the Trilling self who longed to identify with the Hemingway self—the self of the intense literary artist indifferent to or disdainful of society—was opposed by another, and dominant, Trilling self, a self that identified with the writer as man of letters and critic of society. This self was the proponent of the moral relevance, moral importance, and moral dignity of literature as a reality of human existence. In the service of this realm, the critic was responsible to literature even, if necessary, at the expense of becoming somewhat alienated from society. The dominant Trilling self—the man of letters and critic—existed in unhappy conjunction with Trilling the "creative" self. Indeed for years the critic self was under the reproachful censure of the "cre-

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ative" self, which was, in its deliberate alienation from society, according to the value system of the modern literary culture spiritually the superior self.

Keeping in mind this postulation of a basic conflict in Trilling between the critic and the literary artist—the novelist, or in the generic sense of the term, the poet—let us move along by looking at some other moments in the notebooks when, as in the comment on Hemingway, Trilling either overtly or implicitly recognizes the unfolding inward history of his life. The initial moment I shall set down, from the year 1928, when Trilling was twenty-three years old, is a very succinct one, yet it is one that shadowed all the moments of his life: "Being a Jew is like walking in the wind or swimming: you are touched at all points and conscious everywhere." The second moment belongs to the year 1944: "I do not think of myself as a 'Jewish' writer: I do not have it in mind to serve by my writing any Jewish purpose. I would resent it if a critic of my work were to discover in it either faults or virtues which he called Jewish." The third moment goes back to the spring of 1936, when Trilling, who had by then been an instructor at Columbia for four years, heard that he would be dismissed: "The reason for dismissal is that as a Jew, Marxist, Freudian I am uneasy. This hampers my work and makes me unhappy."

Obviously some members of the professoriate at Columbia were as uneasy with the young Trilling as he was with them. Whether or not the fact that Trilling was a Jew entered in a primary way into his situation in 1936 (was more important, I mean, than his professed Marxism and Freudianism) is not clear, but in a time when anti-Semitism was still explicit in America—when at the more refined levels of American life, such as the Ivy League universities, Jews were kept in a segregated state by a "gentleman's agreement"—Trilling's Jewishness undoubtedly colored the attitude some of his senior colleagues took toward him. Their expression of dissatisfaction with his teaching because as a Marxist and a Freudian he violated academic decorum by allegedly presenting "literature as sociology and psychology" instead of as "literature" may well have cloaked an anti-Semitic attitude. Yet if so, it was a cover for something more subtle than simple racial prejudice. Trilling's real violation of academic decorum might well for some of his colleagues have consisted in their feeling that he had come into the academic halls to get out of the wind of his Jewishness. He was that disturbing presence, the outsider who would become an insider. Trilling had gone

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further than the two deracinated men of letters (and both may properly be so called), Marx and Freud, whom he had taken as his models. Choosing deracination, they had become high priests of modern culture; but in electing deracination, Trilling had identified himself primarily, as Marx and Freud did not, with the Western intellectual tradition as it is associated with the university, an institution that still substantially reflected its origin as the embodiment of the medieval ecumence of the Christian mind.

Yet, as we know, if Trilling, either directly or covertly, presented a Jewish problem to Columbia, he was not fired. Although it would be 1939 before he became an assistant professor and five more years before he reached the associate professor rank, Trilling presented more of a problem to himself than to his employer. Considering his commitment to the University to be nominal, insisting (though clearly concerned about his status on the faculty) that the academic profession was antithetical to his true vocation, he was yet unable to identify himself convincingly with a nonacademic, secular-spiritual literary community. He could not intimately experience a feeling of belonging to a literary priesthood redolent of the Christian faith—the order of Flaubert, Henry James, Proust, Joyce, and Hemingway (who expressed the ethos of the order perfectly when he said, "A writer should be of as great probity and honesty as a priest of God"). And, after an early association with a fraternity of liberal Jewish intellectuals represented by the *Menorah Journal*, he had—in spite of a deep and continuing feeling for the rabbinic tradition expressed in his notable essay on "Wordsworth and the Rabbis"—cut himself off from the possibility of belonging (like Malamud, Singer, and Bellow) to a secularized priesthood of Jewish writers. Once, to be sure, Trilling began to doubt his association with the Marxist community of intellectuals, he in effect placed himself outside the available references for the literary life.

It was, I suspect, Trilling's realization that he did not have available to him a sustaining faith in the vocation to writing through an assumed relationship to a literary order that encouraged him to develop the affinity he early on sensed with the Victorians and eventually to choose Arnold for his dissertation subject at Columbia. A last embodiment of Renaissance Christian humanism, Arnold stressed the moralism of the classical writers as a necessary resource in carrying on a cultural program designed both to hold the Philistines at bay and assist in the moral progress of society. In highly principled Victorians like Arnold, Mill, Carlyle, and George

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Eliot, Trilling identified the literary vocation with a transcendent obligation, singularly and severely incumbent on the individual writer, always to make "duty" the preeminent rule of life. One of Trilling's favorite anecdotes was the story told by the Cambridge scholar F. W. H. Myers, who, walking with George Eliot in the Fellows' Garden of Trinity College in the gathering gloom of a rainy May evening, heard this "austere sybil" pronounce the dictum that while God is inconceivable and immortality unbelievable, duty is "beyond question" the "preemptory and absolute" mandate of one's existence.

Yet the Victorians could not hold Trilling forever in their thrall. The self of the artist struggled against them. Whereas, to pick up with another moment in the notebooks, he had discovered at the beginning of the 1930s that John Stuart Mill is "enormously rich and exciting," fifteen years later, in 1945, he confided to his journal:

> The Victorians have lost all charm for me—they make my *parent* literature, the reading of with which I was most cosily at home—I could feel their warmth and seemed always to know my way among them—now they bore me utterly—I cannot read them—I cannot teach them with any conviction . . . Dickens is the exception—possibly Newman—

That Trilling might exclude Cardinal Newman from the charge of boredom does not, one feels sure, indicate any tendency toward a conversion to Christianity; it may intimate the drastic nature of Trilling's repudiation of his feeling of community with the social progressivism of the Victorians. Another notebook entry in 1945 makes this explicit.

> In three-four decades, the liberal progressive has not produced a single writer that it itself respects and reads with interest. A list of writers of our time shows that liberal-progressivism was a matter of contempt or indifference to every writer of large mind—Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, Mann (early), Kafka, Yeats, Gide, Shaw—probably there is not a name to be associated with a love of liberal democracy or a hope for it.

Trilling solidifies his reactionary declaration by pointing to "the enormous breach" between the "'serious' journalism of liberalism" and the "important works of the imagination in our time." It is well, he

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tells himself, that the breach exists, somewhat enigmatically implying that when, under compulsion of the "liberal-democratic ideal," the writer attempts to join imagination and action he contributes to the "spiritual collapse" of his age.

At this point Trilling was engaged with two books. One, a critical work, was to give him fame; the other, a work of the imagination, was to give him some credibility as a novelist but would likely have been little noticed save that it was taken to have been written by the critic, and is an exposé of the fallacy of his commitment to the radical politics of the 1930s. But intended by its author to be a "work of the imagination," *The Middle of the Journey* is at once more than an exposé, and less than a work of the imagination. Both works—*The Liberal Imagination* and *The Middle of the Journey*—are, it seems to me, fundamentally devoted to the same theme, which may be summed up as the illusion of a "continuity between imagination and action," and both seek the true relationship between criticism and fiction, or between ideas and poetry.

How much and at what depth the problem of the relationship between imagination and action preoccupied Trilling in the period from the middle 1940s to the 1950s—how it was a question that now presented itself to him as a most urgent crisis of vocation—cannot be dealt with fully here. But I think that the nature of Trilling's "career crisis" is presented in what may be the most intensely personal, the most dramatic, and it may be the most enigmatic, passage in the published notebook selections. This entry was made in 1946.

> . . . I meant to write here a note that I had just got over a period of abt. 6-8 weeks of insatiable desire for praise & notice—nothing satisfied and the more I got the more I wanted—grew by what it fed on—I had to make conscious effort to check this & not allow it to be publicly seen—I would *court* affirmation and flattery—also about this time a period of terrible sleeping, in which consciousness seemed increased in sleep & nightly problems were presented to me which *had* to be solved—I could see-smell-feel the aura of philosophy—the classroomy, textbooky aura of abstraction, terribly engaging, terribly repelling—life depended on solving the abstract problems presented to me—I wld wake with a hideous sense of desolation and loss—absolutely hopeless—dominant in my thoughts the desire for children—one night near the end of this period a great sense of being on the point of *connection*—the connection between 2 things never before connected, which if reconciled would be of incalculable good—it all

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> depended on my mental effort—but I could not do it—desolate —at the same time (end) a great sense that by not doing criticism, not using my "mind" I was losing all force and poetry whatever—giving myself only to the novel was making me go all soft and nothing—at the same time the novel was beginning to open up, but almost to seem too easy—this association of events came suddenly of itself & is almost too pat!—facing sexual scenes of novel—sexual fantasy in connection with them.

A "great sense of being on the point of *connection*—the connection between 2 things never before connected, which if reconciled would be of incalculable good": did Trilling—at a point when he was working with equal assiduity both as critic and novelist (or poet)—envision the possibility of resolving his divided career as writer? We are struck by the likelihood that this may be the import of the Freudian nightmare he records. Does the traumatic experience of his recurrent dream suggest a painful but blessed union of critic and poet? Whether or not we hear an echo of the Shakespearean imperative, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment," we feel in Trilling's portrayal of his inner history a passion for the marriage of the mind of one self to that of the other. Trilling—is it too much to say?—sought a union in which the passion of the critic not only matches that of the poet but incorporates critic and poet. In a criticism of poetry that is a poetry of criticism—does he say?—he will become the embodiment of a whole and transcendent literary self? I am not prepared to argue that *The Middle of the Journey* in any precise way comes off as an attempt to unify criticism and poetry in the form of a novel. But both his novel and *The Liberal Imagination* suggest that in associating himself with the literature of social ideology promoted by the American "liberal progressivism" of the 1920s, while at the same time being drawn more and more to the "non-rational" literature of the great modern writers, Trilling became, like Allen Tate, the critic as both actor in and interpreter of the literary myth of modern history—I mean the story, the drama, of self and history that is so much the inward substance of modern history.

It would seem to have been at least partly through Tate that Trilling began to be aware of the broad, mythic context of the conflict he experienced between the rationalist literature of political persuasion and the works of the imagination in the twentieth century. In *The Liberal Imagination* Trilling, referring to Carlyle's observation that Shakespeare was "the product of medieval Catholicism *at the*

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distance at which Shakespeare stood from it" and that this had "much to do with the power of Shakespeare's intellect," says:

> Allen Tate has developed in a more particular way an idea that has much in common with what Carlyle here implies. Loosely put, the idea is that religion in its decline leaves a detritus of pieties, of strong assumptions, which afford a particularly fortunate condition for certain kinds of literature; these pieties carry a strong charge of intellect, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they tend to stimulate the mind in a powerful way.

Trilling has pointedly in mind here an essay on Emily Dickinson in Tate's *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (published in 1936), in which Tate, describing this eminently self-conscious descendant of the New England Puritans as "acting out her part in the history of her culture," asks: "What is the nature of a poet's culture?"

> A culture cannot be consciously created. It is an available source of ideas that are imbedded in a complete and homogeneous society. The poet finds himself balanced upon the moment when such a world is about to fall, when it threatens to run out into looser and less self-sufficient impulses. This world order [the Puritan world order] is assimilated in Miss Dickinson, as medievalism was in Shakespeare, to the poetic vision: it is brought down from abstraction to personal sensibility.

In Emily Dickinson, Tate says further, "There is no thought as such at all; nor is there feeling; there is that unique focus of experience which is at once neither and both." Like Shakespeare, she had no opinions but "had all the elements of a culture that has broken up." Her poetry comes from "an intellectual life towards which it feels no moral responsibility."

Trilling, it would seem likely, also read another essay in Tate's *Reactionary Essays*, "The Profession of Letters in the South." In this classic analysis Tate refers to the "peculiar historical consciousness" of the Southern writer, which he defines as "the curious burst of intelligence that we get at a crossing of the ways, not unlike, on an infinitesimal scale, the outburst of poetic genius at the beginning of the sixteenth century when commercial England had already begun to crush feudal England." Identifying the motive of the subject of the contemporary Southern writer with the seventeenth-century transi-

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tion to modernity—the age that announced the effective destruction of the corporate community of Christendom by the forces of science, finance capitalism, and individualism—Tate suggests a parallel between the Southern writer and Marlowe or Shakespeare. In *Hamlet* or *Richard III* particularly Shakespeare dramatizes the psychic consequence of shifting the apprehension of existence from the traditionalist to the historical mode, and prophesies the results of the experience of individuation—comic, pathetic, tragic—that would occur as the society of assigned status fragmented. He not only intuits but establishes the subject of literature for the next five centuries: the modern self's emergence as a historical entity and its struggle to define its existence—pulled on the one hand by the will to autonomous meaning and on the other by its recollection of its origin in the dissolution of a hierarchical order.

Tate's depiction of Emily Dickinson impresses us as curiously ascribing to her ambivalent, even contradictory, character: on the one hand, being devoid of opinions, she is nonintellectual; on the other hand, she is intellectual in that her poetry derives from "an intellectual life." But the intellectual life Tate refers to is not of course her own life; it is what is still left of the "great idea" of puritanism—the necessity of absolutely purifying the relationship between God and the individual soul, which rested on a sophisticated theology devised by a highly learned body of Puritan theologians (or intellectuals). Tate's acute discernment of Emily Dickinson's situation, we judge, is not the greater because he is an intellectual and a critic than because he is a novelist and poet. We see in Tate the clear lineaments of that hybrid being who came into existence in the seventeenth century in response to the poet's need to explain his cultural situation to himself. I refer to the critic who defines the culture on the poet's terms. Abstracting the elements of the culture, he describes and explicates what the poet once assumed as given but now must seek to understand. In other words, he is a poet-critic, who makes poetry out of his search to understand the cultural situation. The line of poet-critics extends from Ben Jonson and Donne to Dryden, Pope, and Samuel Johnson; and on to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Carlyle, Arnold, Poe, Whitman, Baudelaire, Henry James, Eliot, Edmund Wilson, and R. P. Blackmur. We can say, too, that the line extends to writers whose overt critical activity is incidental but whose critical sensibility—encompassed in their historical sensibility—is a primary governing force in their poetic accomplishment: among them, Flaubert, Yeats, Joyce, Hemingway, and Faulkner.

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In fact, it is hardly too much to claim that all poetry—all work of the imagination—from the age of Donne on displays a tension between the critical and the poetic. The initial documentation of such a claim is Donne's magnificent poem, "Anatomy of the World," which is a direct critique of his culture—the culture of science and history—and is a more exact intimation than anything in Shakespeare of the subject of modern literature as defined by Trilling: "the selfhood which culture cherishes as its dearest gift." Donne's brutal metaphorical vision of the dissection of the anatomy of the medieval cosmology—exemplified by the work of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo—mirrors the disintegration of what had formerly seemed to be a divinely willed social structure.

> Prince, subject, father, son are things forgot,
>
> For every man alone thinks he hath got
>
> To be a phoenix, and that then can be
>
> None of that kind, of which he is, but he.

Yet, Donne suggests, in his new condition of being—in his sensitivity to the isolation of the self in history and the isolation of history in the self—the poet will find new force of being. Displaced from the bardic community of myth and tradition, he will, through his own will, relocate poetry in the dominion of the individual consciousness.

I become discursive. But in seeking to anticipate the result of Trilling's final rejection of programmatic liberalism and with it the programmatic pursuit of literature, Trilling, one realizes, is implicated in literary history as deeply as Eliot, Proust, Joyce, and the rest, who, in his estimation, are the authors of the "works of the imagination of our time."

A great easing of his struggle between the programmatic and the imaginative occurred when Trilling abandoned the notion that he must somehow interpret history as an ideological struggle. Another way to put this is to say that he came into the knowledge that literary power is never vested in ideas conceived as categorical concepts but in ideas conceived as emotions. I do not think we can uncover a wondrous epiphanic moment when the fallacy of rational constructs of history came to Trilling. The transformation of his vision of history, occurring uncertainly and slowly (and never completely) is most strikingly evidenced perhaps by his inner doubt and

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pain about his continuing affiliation with the academic world. In 1948 he appraised the meaning of his promotion to a full professor in terms not only of self-deprecation but almost of self-loathing, writing in his notebooks that he feared he was each year growing "weaker & weaker, more academic, less a person." He adds with unequivocal desperation: "Suppose I were to dare to believe that one could be a professor and a man! and a writer! — what arrogance and defiance of convention. Yet I deeply dare to believe that — and must learn to believe it on the surface." In 1951 Trilling took the most decisive gesture he ever made toward attaining freedom from the university system: he gave up his identification both with his major subject matter field, American literature, and his status as a graduate professor and went back to undergraduate lecturing. As any university teacher knows, a voluntary renunciation of one's status as a member of a graduate faculty — even though in Trilling's case it did not involve going back to freshman composition — is almost inconceivable. Even more than his resignation from the graduate school, Trilling's rejection of American literature as an academic subject can be taken as a last-ditch effort to separate the self of the critic from that of the imaginative writer. Contending with himself in the privacy of his notebooks, Trilling declares that he must get away from specializing in American literature because this "denies my being a part of it." This objection is juxtaposed with the somewhat incongruous idea that "as a subject" American literature cannot be dealt with in a systematic way through the study of its individual authors. It must be studied as a "history of culture." Yet Trilling reveals he is not thinking about an objective, systematic interpretation of American literature in its relation to cultural history. He has in mind, he says, an approach that is subjective — one that will require not only "subtlety & complexity" but "a total intellectual and emotional involvement." This, he protests, he cannot dedicate himself to. The ambiguity of his diagnosis of his connection with the literature of his own country suggests a genuine element of pathos in his situation. Had he not in truth reached the point when he must acknowledge that both the circumstances of his life and the limitations of his talent dictated that, though he was touched by the poet, his literary role would be largely that of the critic? Did he not want to obviate the pain of recognizing that he would never cut a figure as an American novelist? At the same time, did he not somehow understand that in his very attempt to fulfill his aspiration to be "a writer" — to be an author of works of the imagination, and thus a "part" of the literature

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of America—he had been living out the question put by Tate, "What is a poet's culture?" That, enmeshed in a detritus of pieties, he had been living his own version of the "crossing of the ways," participating in the repetitive experience of writers since Donne and discovering his own way what Tate says Poe and Hawthorne discovered a hundred years before, the essential modern subject, "the isolation and frustration of personality"?

By 1949, when he wrote "The Meaning of a Literary Idea" for a conference on American literature at the University of Rochester, Trilling had, I think, formulated a poetic, dramatic, and dynamic idea about the nature of literary ideas that would provide the foundation for a poetics of cultural criticism.

> What comes into being when two contradictory emotions are made to confront each other and are required to have a relationship with each other is . . . quite properly called an idea. Ideas may also be said to be generated in the opposition of ideals, and in the felt awareness of the impact of new circumstances upon old forms of feeling and estimation, in the response to the conflict between new exigencies and old pieties. And it can be said that a work will have what I have been calling cogency in the degree that the confronting emotions go deep, or in the degree that the old pieties are firmly held and the new exigencies strongly apprehended.

At the end of the essay in which this definition of the "literary idea" is made ("The Meaning of a Literary Idea," which appears in *The Liberal Imagination*) Trilling says that when we learn to "think of ideas as living things, inescapably connected with our wills and desires, as suspectible of growth and development by their very nature, as showing their life by their tendency to change, as being liable, by this very tendency, to deteriorate and become corrupt and to work harm, then we shall stand in a relation to ideas which makes an active literature possible." During the years following the essay on "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," Trilling composed the series of compelling meditations on the idea of the modern self that constitutes his major achievement and—although he himself may never have quite known this—fulfills, as far as he could do so, his desire to be the author of works of the imagination. Significantly these meditations were composed in nearly all instances as occasional pieces—being written in response to an invitation to give a paper somewhere, provide an introductory comment for a new edition of a

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book, etcetera. Save, moreover, for *Sincerity and Authenticity*, a small volume composed of the Norton Lectures, Trilling wrote no more book-length works. Although leading the regular life of the classroom lecturer, he took on jobs like a freelance essayist, taking up topics as the literary demand arose; living apart from the academic tendency to deprecate the essay in favor of the book-length work, Trilling solidified his fame with two collections of essays published ten years apart. The first of these (the other is *Beyond Culture*, 1965), *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*, was published in 1955, the same year in which Tate brought out the volume that in the overall sense is his most significant collection of essays, *The Man of Letters in the Modern World.*

As this book is in Tate's career, *The Opposing Self* is, I take it, the crucial, the central, work in Trilling's career. Devoted to essays, or meditations, on Keats, Dickens, Tolstoy, Wordsworth, Orwell, Flaubert, and (in spite of his declaration about American literature) on two Americans, Howells and James, this volume, the author points out in a prefatory essay, deals with "episodes in the literature of the last century and a half." In the case of each writer he considers, Trilling says:

> I speak of the relation of the self to *culture* rather than to *society* because there is a useful ambiguity which attends the meaning of the word culture. It is the word by which we refer not only to a people's achieved works of intellect and imagination but also to its mere assumptions and unformulated valuations, to its habits, its manners, and its superstitions. The modern self is characterized by certain powers of indignant perception which, turned upon this unconscious portion of culture, have made it accessible to conscious thought.

In his declaration of the capacities of the modern self Trilling united the poet and the critic and by implication established the definition he had long sought of his own vocation to literature. But the cost of fulfilling this vocation—of obeying the self's powers of perception—is high, as the last essay in *The Opposing Self*, a disturbing meditation on *Mansfield Park*, makes clear; the expense is nothing less than the self's terrorizing of the self. I quote at some length from the key passage in the essay on Jane Austen's novel:

> It was Jane Austen who first represented the specifically modern personality and the culture in which it had its being.

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> Never before had the moral life been shown as she shows it to be, never before had it been conceived to be so complex and difficult and exhausting. Hegel speaks of the "secularization of spirituality" as a prime characteristic of the modern epoch, and Jane Austen is the first to tell us what this involves. She is the first novelist to represent society, the general culture, as playing a part in the moral life, generating the concepts of "sincerity" and "vulgarity" which no earlier time would have understood the meaning of, and which for us are so subtle they defy definition, and are so powerful that none can escape their sovereignty. She is the first to be aware of the Terror which rules our [the writer's] moral situation, the ubiquitous anonymous judgment to which we respond, the necessity we feel to demonstrate the purity of our [the writer's] secular spirituality, whose dark and dubious places are more numerous and obscure than those of religious spirituality, to put our lives and styles to the question, making sure that not only in deeds but in *decor* they exhibit the signs of our belonging to the number of the secular-spiritual elect.
>
> She herself is an agent of the Terror—we learn from her what our lives should be and by what subtle and fierce criteria they will be judged, and how to pass upon the lives of our friends and fellows. Once we have comprehended her mode of judgment, the moral and spiritual lessons of contemporary literature are easy—the metaphysics of "sincerity" and "vulgarity" once mastered, the modern teachers, Lawrence and Joyce, Yeats and Eliot, Proust and Gide, have but little to add save in the way of contemporary and abstruse examples.

In defining Jane Austen as the agent of the Terror of the secular spirituality that must serve the self of the modern writer—who having internalized history is imprisoned in it—as his only moral resource, we have the climactic moment (or so I would argue) in Trilling's search for vocational identity. It is the moment when his own power of indignant perception has become luminous to itself, and poet and critic have coalesced in a poetics of criticism; or, it may be said, in a poetics of the authorial self, which is characterized by the desperately precarious nature of the authorial self's authority over itself.

In the remarkable prefatory essay to *The Man of Letters in the Modern World*, Allen Tate says we may scarcely hold that the moment of indignant perception bears a weight akin to that of the peripety of tragedy, the moment when the last seal on the tragic hero's ignorance of his condition is broken and the knowledge of his

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fate is fully revealed to him. Like Tate, Trilling would have been scornful of the idea that the modern critic qualifies as a tragic hero. But Tate may be said to have in a general sense spoken for Trilling as well as for himself in his conclusion that the "act of criticism . . . is a crisis of recognition always" and is not without a certain tragic ambience in that, for all the effort put into it, criticism yields no certain nor finally any knowledge at all. What the practice of criticism gives the critic in the end is the certain knowledge "that as literary critic one knows virtually nothing." By the time Tate said this he presumably knew a vision of existence beyond tragedy. He had been a Roman Catholic for five years, having formally accepted in 1959 what he had always believed to be true, namely that religion must be the condition of literature. Trilling could never believe other than that it is "an impropriety to try to guarantee literature by a religious belief." All that Trilling had to guarantee his vocation to literature was ultimately the quality of his devotion to it. On the basis of his witness to his vocation in his writings we can point to his literary commitment as being like that he attributes to Jane Austen when he speaks of her personality having answered to the demand of the modern secular-spiritual moral standard as described by Hegel: it requires that we not only put our deeds but the style of our lives to the question. Explicating Hegel in *The Opposing Self*, Trilling says that in the modern world moral and aesthetic standards are no longer joined "in the old way," one, that is, that makes "morality the criterion of the aesthetic"; the aesthetic is now the criterion of the moral," so that "not merely the deed itself . . . is . . . submitted to judgment," but the "entire nature, the *being*, of the agent." In the latter years of his life Trilling developed this notion about the quality of the agent still more intensely, elaborating in *Sincerity and Authenticity* an intricate distinction between the "sincere self" and the "authentic self." We may think with some assurance that he was impelled to elevate the concept of authenticity by his understanding of what disappears when religion is lost: this is, he says, nothing less than reality, "the imperative actuality of life." This observation occurs in *Sincerity and Authenticity* at a point when we might not expect it, in a discussion of Freud, for whom, as Trilling must insist, religion was an illusion. But Trilling read Freud as a great tragic poet, who in his youth, Trilling recalls, chose John Milton "as a favorite poet" because, "Although the idea of redemption could mean nothing to him," he shared "Milton's appalled elation . . . in the ordeal of man's life in history." For Trilling such an astringent but vividly dramatic, and immensely humanizing, atti-

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tude toward history guaranteed the continued meaning of literature. He had authenticated this attitude through his own experience of being a writer—his criticism at its best being, like the work of Jane Austen or D. H. Lawrence, an agency of the terror of the modern literary insight into the nature of history; he himself being a troubled, and compassionate, agent of the terror he beheld in our self-conscious existence in history.

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Michel Tournier

FIVE KEYS FOR ANDRÉ GIDE

1933. Diverting conversation about the difference between Doric *and* Ionian *art which symbolize for Gide the two eternal streams in art . . . Among the Dorians he lumps together Rabelais, Molière, Corneille, Rude, and himself* (sic) . . . *Among the Ionians: Clodion, Carpeaux, Renan, etc.*

"It's true," he adds, "that they also have Racine."

"And what about Barrès?"

"Barrès? He's the epitome of Ionian art! He owes even more to Renan than to Chateaubriand."

"And Montaigne?"

"Ah, Montaigne? How awkward! I do believe the brute has a foot in each camp . . ."[1]

Without doubt, there are the Dorians and the Ionians. There are also the short and the tall, the mean and the generous, the dark and the fair, the rich and the poor. From this snippet of Roger Martin du Gard we can in any case glean that André Gide was not averse to toying with binary classifications. It is clear that Roger Martin du Gard does not believe a word of it himself. And they are no doubt both right. Rather than being used like a sledgehammer a "dichotomy" is something to be refined until it vanishes. Nonetheless, the notion of what is *alternative*—from Kierkegaard to Bergson—has always been a valuable and effective tool for analysis and, apropos of the novel, one could cite the exemplary case of Émile Zola's *Ventre de Paris*, the entire structure of which is based on the contrast between the thin and the fat.

And because Gide himself seems to invite it we should like to test out on him a set of binary keys which we believe, if tempered with a dash of scepticism and playfulness, can help shed light on the whole of Gide's work, from *The Immoralist* to *Strait is the Gate.*

Let us begin by making a general distinction between two important literary genealogies: the family of egotists—or should we say navel-watchers?—and the family of fiction-makers.

Editor's Note: This essay appeared in *Scripsi.* Copyright © Gallimard 1981.

[1]Roger Martin du Gard, *Notes sur André Gide* (Editions Gallimard).

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The first know only how to speak of themselves. Under the most various guises—whether their subject is Julius Caesar, fluctuations on the Stock Exchange, rainy or fine weather—they are forever holding forth about themselves. In my opinion, they cannot be considered real novelists because a real novel only exists if it is peopled with a range of characters who are distinct from each other and from the author, none of them occupying center stage to the point of eclipsing the others. The novels of Balzac, Hugo, Dumas, Zola and even Marcel Proust's *Recherche* meet this criterion but Montaigne, Rousseau, Chateaubriand and these days François Nourissier merely create an egocentric *oeuvre*, however much they may pretend otherwise.

We have mentioned egotism, which naturally brings Stendhal to mind. This is, however, a debatable case—in Gide's terms Stendhal would be someone with "a foot in each camp"—as debatable as that of Flaubert, but in a different way. For if Stendhal is indeed always at the center of his work, it is in a centrifugal rather than a centripetal sense. This bald, red-faced, toothless, pot-bellied little man wrote about himself only in order to escape from himself, to project his romantic and adventurous spirit onto heroes of adolescent pallor and slimness. As for Flaubert we can counter his too-oft quoted "Madame Bovary, c'est moi" by citing the following pieces of advice he gives to Louise Colet: "If banished to the horizon your heart will illuminate you from afar rather than dazzling you with its proximity" (March 27, 1852). "You will completely fulfil your talent by stripping away your sexuality, which must be a source of knowledge and not of dissipation" (November 2, 1852). "The artist in his work must be like God in his Creation, invisible and all-powerful. He must be everywhere felt, but never seen" (March 18, 1857).[2]

As for André Gide there is no doubt that all his work constitutes an attempt to clarify and to exhaust—always in vain, of course—the mystery of the personality of André Gide. It is true that an obvious remark like this immediately calls for significant qualification. For Gide's egotism bears no resemblance to that of the two other great Protestants in French literature: Henri-Frédéric Amiel, who was self-centered like a man cosseting himself against the cold, or Benjamin Constant, whose self-centeredness was reckless and muddle-

[2]Translation by Francis Steegmuller from *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830–1857* (Faber, London, 1981), p. 230.

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headed. It is even less like Julien Green's stuffy narrow-mindedness. A wealthy, cultured aesthete from the middle class, André Gide, because of his genuine and selfless commitment to a variety of causes, never stopped taking risks which put his reputation, his freedom and even his life at stake. We will come back to this. But before doing so we shall put forward a second *alternative*, one which is nonetheless linked with the first.

Some writers have a physical "presence," whether naturally or by contrivance, while others are like the man in the street, happy to lose themselves in the crowd, convinced that in order to see and observe properly there is nothing better than not being seen. If Joseph Kessel had taken it into his head to punch tickets in the metro he would have caused a mob to gather. In the same situation Simenon would never be noticed. In our literary tradition there is a particular tendency to dandyism cultivated by one group—Théophile Gautier, Baudelaire, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Jean Cocteau, Louis Aragon—but there are also those who stand out because of the sharpness of their silhouettes. Now Gide, more than any other writer of his time, had a "presence" which became increasingly pronounced with the years. His intimates have of course left sketches of this bizarre figure. Taking only two privileged witnesses, let us took at Roger Martin du Gard and Maria van Rysselberghe. Here is the first "unveiling" of André Gide as seen by Roger Martin du Gard:

> The door half opens. A man slips into the shop, like a derelict coming to warm himself in a church. The brim of his battered hat hides his eyes; a huge bell-shaped overcoat hangs from his shoulders. He makes one think of an old actor, half-starved and out of work; or of those Bohemian wrecks who end up, some night when they're flat broke, in the night hostel; or again, of those habitués of the Bibliothèque Nationale, the professional copiers, with their dubious underwear, who doze off at midday over their folio, having breakfasted on a crust of bread. A defrocked priest, perhaps? A defrocked priest with a bad conscience? . . . But everyone goes up to him, he is a member of the firm. He has taken off his coat and his hat. His travelling suit, gone baggy, doesn't seem to sit properly on his gangling body; a neck like an old bird's pokes out of his gaping frayed collar. He is balding at the front, his hair is beginning to turn grey; there are tufts of it at the nape of his neck that have the dull look of dead

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> hair. His Mongol's mask of a face with its oblique, prominent, arching eyebrows, is dotted with a few warts. The features are distinctive but limp; his colour is greyish, his cheeks hollow, badly shaven. Thin, tight lips trace a long, sinuous, elastic line. His eyes shift slyly between their lids with a few evasive flashes, which are accompanied by a smile that is something of a grimace, childish and wily, both timid and affected.
>
> Schlumberger brings him up to me. I am amazed. It's André Gide . . .[3]

The nocturnal look this character has about him in broad daylight is surpassed in its strangeness by the nightwear that Roger Martin du Gard finds him in when invited to the Gides' at La Bastide:

> I found out that, for sleeping, he dons a sort of white, thick, fluffy dressing-gown that hangs down to his ankles like a baker's apron; and around his waist he wraps as tightly as he can, compressing his diaphragm, a wide shawl three metres long, made of black silk! He looks like some sort of funereal mama mouchi . . .[4]

Finally, R. M. G. gives us a detailed description of Gide's laughter:

> He never laughs openly or wildly. But when he tells a story whose pungency or lewdness delights him his voice takes on an incredible falsetto tone, rises to a shrill pitch, and then suddenly strangles in a moist gurgle. His cheeks swell with excess saliva. His bottom lip falls, sticks out and opens like a damp little bowl, while in the slits of his slanted lids, his laughing eyes, barely visible, fix on his companion with an expression of intense curiosity and jubilation.[5]

Last of all, here are three sketches by Maria van Rysselberghe, the "petite dame":

> I've already said that he's very sensitive to the cold. In a large dressing-gown that he wears over his clothes, a soft hat, his big horn-rimmed glasses, his legs wrapped in an Algerian blanket, he has a touch of the old actor and the wise old man. He spent

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[3]Roger Martin du Gard, *Notes sur André Gide* (Editions Gallimard).
[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid.

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> the day with his feet in the warming-oven or in a basket known as "the cat-basket."
>
> . . . he came into my place and made me burst out laughing. His appearance was fantastic, very Moliéresque, strangely powerful: wearing a cotton bonnet which stood straight up on his head, a green shawl over his shoulders, and completely draped in a huge blue burnous, he looked like some sort of terrifying Père Ubu.
>
> This morning he was unbelievable, sitting on a low chair, glued to his radiator, his knees up to his chin, all hunched over, tightly buttoned up in a brown indoor suit, a large black moleskin hat on his head. He looked like a big, beautiful, expensive stuffed toy, the monkey with spectacles.[6]

The evolution of the physical appearance of certain great writers casts a curious light on the fascinating problem of inherited versus acquired characteristics and the relationship between them. Often the work acts slowly on the body and imprints its image more deeply on it from year to year. From the succession of photos of Victor Hugo we can trace the formation of a noble and inspired mask placed on a face whose vulgarity one might have feared irremediable. Baudelaire also had one of the most ordinary faces, which only artifice, sometimes of the most extravagant kind (hair dyed green), managed to render unusual. Often the general appearance evolves towards a serene nobility which can demand a simplicity of dress taken to the point of austerity. Examples: Goethe, Hauptmann, Breton. This is even more true of Stefan George whose truly monstrous beauty in his last years positively called for a priestly aura. "He is as beautiful as Satan," said Robert de Montesquiou, a specialist in the field. It is remarkable that Gide managed to escape this process of petrifaction, despite a fame which at the end of his life tended to turn him into the Pope of the Literary World, and even, after his Nobel Prize, the conscience of the West. If you look at the last photographs taken of him, the word which first comes to mind is *acute*. A face, a whole character, drawn towards the external world, sharpened by that appetite and curiosity which Gide himself ascribes to the adolescent Theseus:

> I was the wind, the wave. I was a plant. I passed beyond myself. And every contact I had with the outside world, rather than

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[6]Maria van Rysselberghe, *les Cahiers de la Petite Dame* (Editions Gallimard).

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> showing me my limits, awakened voluptuous desire in me. I caressed fruit, the bark of the young trees, the smooth pebbles of the shores, the pelts of dogs and horses. And then I caressed women. To everything enchanting offered me by Pan, Zeus, or Thetis, I rose up.

This love for things and beings brings us to yet another duality which I shall place under the rough heading: "orexia-anorexia," though admittedly the distinction of "yes or no to life" would mean much the same thing, with rather less ado.

The Italian screen actor Marcello Mastroianni recently had to answer one of the questions from Proust's notorious questionnaire: *What is your worst fault?* With a lucidity and courage that must be admired, he proceeded to launch against himself the most terrible of accusations. In a phrase made all the more forceful by its ambiguity, he replied: "My lack of interest." And went on to explain that he never opened a book, never looked at a painting, did not listen to music, ate and made love out of habit and plied his trade as an actor while thinking about other things. He did not specify whether it had always been that way for him though everything suggested that it had.

In September 1949, at the age of eighty, André Gide wrote:

> I have made the acquaintance of a word that describes a condition from which I have been suffering for months—a very beautiful word: anorexia. From *an*, privative, and *orexis*, appetite. It means a lack of appetite ("which must not be confused with loathing," says Littré). This term is hardly used by any but doctors, but that doesn't matter; I need it. To say that I am suffering from anorexia is going too far; the worst of it is that I scarcely suffer from it at all. But my physical and intellectual want of appetite has become such that at times I don't really know what keeps me alive except the habit of living. It seems to me that to cease being I should merely have to let myself go.[7]

Anorexia—Mastroianni's permanent state of being—normally describes an ailment which psychiatrists observe in certain anaemic and neurotic young girls who seem to want to cling to their virginity. It is clear that neither in their cases nor in Mastroianni's could

[7]André Gide (trans. Justin O'Brien), *So Be It; or, The Chips Are Down* (Knopf: New York, 1959), p. 6.

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anorexia be seen as the fulfillment of a life that has attained its essential goals. Yet that is the meaning which applies in Gide's case. It is true that a few lines further on he adds: "The four of us were sitting in an arbor, not so thick but that we could see recurrent touches of deep-blue sky between the broad vine leaves."[8]

Has happiness ever been described in a more limpid, wise and communicative way than in this simple sentence which so marvellously illustrates what Malraux calls the "art of convolution"? It hardly matters. "Lack of interest" makes its entrance in this life. Totally deprived of sleep for several weeks before her death, that other great devourer of books, ideas, human beings and kilometers, Germaine de Staël moaned: "Life is too long without sleep. There's not enough to keep one interested for twenty-four hours." Soon after, she went into her death-throes. Gide had a reprieve of eighteen months after his first encounter with the bad fairy Anorexia.

It is no coincidence that this encounter should have taken place in death's waiting room. Gide, who died of anorexia, lived and wrote only by "orexia," a term we have to coin just for him and for which we have no equivalent. It could be clumsily rendered by *appetite.* But the old theology already knew the word *concupiscence* (to which Bossuet devoted a treatise) and meant by it everything implied in a love for life, from bodily hunger and a thirst for tenderness, to intellectual curiosity and the will to learn—all of which were notoriously anathema in the eyes of Catholic morality.

It might be interesting to give an outline of Gide's "orexia" but first we should note his exceptional originality among his contemporaries and peers. We will omit Claudel whose point of view on concupiscence was much the same as Bossuet's and who spent his whole life building up the ramparts and filling in the cracks of the fortress of dogmatism in which he had ensconced himself. At the end of his life, deprived of breath and the use of his legs, deaf and three-quarters blind, he reverently marvels at how well he manages with all these infirmities.

Marcel Proust and Paul Valéry, closer to Gide, also barricade themselves, each according to his own genius, in an increasingly desperate solitude. Tortured by his asthma, the living symbol of his allergy to everything and everyone, Proust isolates himself in a cork-lined room and no longer travels except in that lost time he struggles

[8]Ibid., p. 8.

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to recapture and restore, the archaeologist of his own life, the antiquarian of himself. Paul Valéry, through his exaltation of the intellect, an idol which is merely the correlative of his lack of mathematics (he was never good at it and was for this reason refused entry to the Naval Academy in his youth), managed to create for himself a nauseating emptiness in which he dragged around his obsessions with suicide. We shall return to these two contemporaries of Gide's.

But you will note in passing that this predilection for saying "no" to everything—whether its style is haughty, enraged, or plaintive—is both rich in precedents and brilliantly exemplified in later generations. Further back, we have Vigny, Baudelaire, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Bloy. Nearer at hand, Céline, Artaud, Sartre, Cioran. There is no point in asking how much can be ascribed to sincerity and how much to posture in this cry of *no* to life—black is always formal dress. For in the end only the work counts, whatever the author's sincerity or duplicity. It remains true that the "yes" or "no" to life is a useful yardstick for distinguishing two families, not only of writers, but of men and women in general. It would obviously be unjust and cruel to say that everyone gets plunged in the environment they deserve, but it is clear that each of us, in an identical milieu, unwittingly cuts out a reality that we construct to fit our own requirements, and which we are often mad enough to consider the only viable one.

I hope you will forgive a personal digression. A few years ago I happened to be in Venice and I was dining with René Etiemble, whose erudition, lucidity and bitterness I like and admire. I was sitting opposite him and I opened my mouth to say, "I have spent the afternoon on the Lido beach. I am still dazzled by the beauty of the young people I saw there." But he cut me off a second before I could speak and announced as he was unfolding his napkin, "My wife and I have spent the afternoon on the Lido beach. We were staggered by the ugliness of the bathers we saw there." The contradiction was so brutal that it still leaves me dumbfounded. A contradiction obviously to be found more in our ways of seeing things than in the things themselves. When he was dying, Monet used to say, "I have never seen anything that was ugly." I could almost say the same myself. Seeing "beauty" is of course no great source of comfort or of happiness. The beauty that hits you in the eye and in the heart at every street corner often wounds you in an incurable way. There are faces, and more rarely bodies, that I have seen for a few seconds, only to lose all trace of them forever, and yet the burning memory of them has not stopped haunting me for ten or twenty years, sometimes for

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half a century. I have the searing conviction that they carried away with them promises of incomparable happiness, now forever gone. . . .

Those who say *yes* can imagine only with difficulty the grey and hate-filled world of the *no*. A world filled with people who shun physicality and shudder at the warm, trembling, generally moist contact of living things. They never stroke an animal, never spontaneously hug a child; the promiscuity of fur, feathers and flesh revolts them, as does everything that comes out of the body—saliva, urine, excrement, sperm, blood. This mentality was enshrined as a moral code by the Victorian society of the nineteenth century and by the Catholic and Protestant churches in its service. It is worth adding that the theories of Pasteur and of hygienics which derive from it appeared at just the right moment to provide a scientific alibi.

André Gide was par excellence a man who said *yes*, an abundant, harmonious *yes*, fulfilled by a life formed by the horn of plenty. Apropos of small animals, we might recall the time he visited—Nobel Prize meets Nobel Prize—Hermann Hesse in his chalet at Montagnola (Tessin). We don't know what the two great men said to each other, but Hermann Hesse reports with amusement that for the entire meeting, Gide was transfixed and only had eyes for the basket where the mother cat of the house was sharing herself out as best she could between her four kittens. It must have been a spectacle no less moving or instructive for Gide than that of coming upon the great Swiss writer in his home environment.

This "no" to life which some people never stop saying—or at least they persistently illustrate it in their behavior—finds an almost caricatured embodiment very close to Gide in the person of his wife. The Madeleine Gide "affair" (and there was a full inquiry and trial concerning this woman, as is witnessed by Gide's contemporaries, his critics and, it should be admitted, by Gide himself) hinges on two dates: May 31, 1895, the death of Gide's mother, and June 17, André Gide's engagement to Madeleine. Until the age of twenty-six, Gide had quaked in the presence of his mother, who incarnated puritan and antiphysical pseudomorality in its most repulsive form. Her arrival in February 1894 at the oasis of Biskra, where Gide and his painter-friend Paul-Albert Laurens were busily cavorting, was like the Commendatore's statue coming to knock with a fist of stone on the door of Don Juan. Fortunately the Commendatore was not out of the grave for long. She was buried sixteen months later. Gide was overwhelmed by his freedom. He compared himself to "a kite with its

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string suddenly cut, a boat severed from its moorings, a shipwreck for the wind and tide to play with." These alarming images can only be fully understood if we remember that in the same year Oscar Wilde was being torn to pieces by Victorian society. To put it simply: Gide took fright. And in an act of folly, he resurrected his mother by marrying his cousin Madeleine, older than he was, and just as pickled in piety as the dead woman. He had no illusions about this phoney marriage. He had been married barely three months when he wrote: "How many times, when Madeleine is in her room . . . have I confused her with my mother." He was not the only one to make this mistake. During a trip to Fécamp, one of the boys from the hotel where they were staying came up to Gide and said, "Your mother is waiting for you in the car." This equation of Madeleine with mother suffices to explain why their marriage was never consummated. If Gide never slept with Madeleine, it is obviously not because he "preferred" boys (it is a strange psychology which claims to deduce from the preference for one thing the distaste for another!) but because, being a normal and healthy man, he had no taste for incest.

If Madeleine had had an ounce of wit or courage, she would have faced up to this situation—which in itself was nothing extraordinary—and taken her cue from the genius of her husband, playing the role of his affectionate and perceptive accomplice, which was exactly the one played (much later, alas) by Maria van Rysselberghe. One can also dream of the turn the story might have taken if another woman, of Madeleine's generation but of an altogether different stamp, had been in her place. Imagine the strange and brilliant Lou Andréas Salomé whose intimate friends included Nietzsche, Rilke and Freud (what a trio!) and of whom it has been said that when a writer fell in love with her he gave birth nine months later to a masterpiece. In addition, Lou Andréas Salomé had an obvious vocation for platonic love and eternal chastity, to the great distress of her "lovers" and even of her husband. Perhaps she tried all her life to recreate, more or less consciously, the conditions of her childhood and adolescence. It must be remembered that she was the only girl, and the youngest child, in a family of five. Her early childhood was therefore spent in the shadow of four elder brothers who of course had no sexual designs on their "little sister." Maybe she wanted to remain this little sister with all the great intellectuals whose lives she subsequently shared.

After a thousand hesitations, and with enormous diffidence,

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Madeleine married her cousin, a good pious young man, but woke up one morning beside King Saul, as the wife of the Immoralist, as the bedfellow of Lafcadio—in short as Madame André Gide, the wife of an eminent and notorious writer. From the outset of their honeymoon, which took them to the Engadine, to Florence, Rome, Naples, Syracuse, Tunis, El-Kantara, Biskra, Touggourt, etc., her whining indolence, her apathy, her fear of everything left her dragging behind Gide, who was exploding with his passion for discovery. Pallid and spineless, this woman was like a ball and chain tied to the ankle of the tireless walker, the eternal lover. "A tragic life, Nathanael, is better than a tranquil one." Madeleine obviously chose to invert this. A few years afterwards, *The Immoralist* recounts a similar journey by idealizing it, that is to say by burying the encumbering wife. Michel who is sick—sick of his puritanical and family-minded society—recovers his health in the desert. Noticing that Marceline, on the other hand, cannot bear the African climate, he returns with her and forces her to walk relentlessly until she ends up in a little mound in the flowering cemetery of El-Kantara. In short, divorce "African-style," "à la Sahara." Now while it is a good thing that Goethe, when "suiciding" Werther, found it unnecessary to die for love of Charlotte, when killing off Madeleine in the effigy of Marceline, Gide remained just as married and hampered as before. There are some things that cannot be done only in fictional form.

It is true that, of the unhappy pair, it was Gide who called the tune because he had clung to the idea of marriage with such tenacity. His mother had been imposed on him by fate. Madeleine was his own invention, his personal decision. In dealing with a writer so resolutely moral we can I think put the equation of his life in terms of vice and virtue. But the words must then be given their primary, intelligible meaning, where by *vice* we denote whatever reduces a being and depletes its vital strength; and by *virtue*, on the contrary, whatever heightens the creative faculties. Gide's life defines itself in relation to a great virtue and a deplorable vice. His virtue is his comprehensive *orexia*, primarily the love for young boys which brightened and warmed his life; it was his liberation and his joy, the wellspring of all his work. His vice was his affection, his inexplicable, unspeakable, endless affection for a mediocre woman he never had the courage to abandon. Madeleine was the old man in Gide, the dead and rotting past which he dragged around behind him, as if he

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were a snake which by some aberration could never quite slough its old skin, unable at his worst to resist the temptation to slip into it again. She had only one saving grace: in 1918 she took it on herself to destroy all the letters Gide had written her—quite a considerable bundle—which would doubtless have constituted a remarkably fatuous, nauseating and mushy area of his work. She had the courage to perform this amputation. Why didn't he take advantage of it to carry out one that was even more radical and necessary?

This role of living relic that Madeleine played with Gide inevitably makes one think of another madeleine, namely Proust's, which was also an index of time lost. But the two men were travelling in opposite directions, Gide being passionately attracted to an absolute and radiant future, while Proust, with his back turned on the twentieth century, was patiently reconstituting the skeleton of his childhood. This is no doubt why Gide's Madeleine possessed none of the mouthwatering charms of the delicate and golden little cake that melted so deliciously on Proust's tongue.

We have mentioned Paul Valéry and Marcel Proust: we should also invoke Henri Ghéon, Pierre Louÿs, Oscar Wilde, the principal figures and the lesser characters who gave life to that influential group from which the *Nouvelle Revue Française* would be born. We shall do so from one angle which may offer a fourth dichotomy, that of "primary" and "secondary" natures.

Let us first make it clear that this distinction comes to us from the tradition of character sketches, and that in order to understand it properly, it is necessary to forget the school-room connotation, which runs the risk of clinging to it like a bad smell.

A "secondary" person lives with constant reference to his past and his future. Nostalgia for what has been, and fear of what is to come, befog the present, and devalue immediate sensation. His intelligence depends more on calculation than intuition. The space he inhabits is an echo-chamber and a labyrinth of possibilities. In love, fidelity is more important to him than freedom.

The "primary" person is dazzled by the freshness of an everlasting present. He can be cerebral or sensual but he is a man of primitive clarity and first beginnings. For him every morning is the first day of Creation. He doesn't get entangled with ghosts and shadows. He can at any given moment be rude or inconsiderate but

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never with malice. He surrenders himself instinctively to whatever is going. Nothing is stranger than certain couples one sees coming together throughout history, where a "primary" and a "secondary" type are linked, at once attracted and repelled by each other, forever wavering between awe and contempt, love and hate. So we have, for example, "primary" Voltaire and "secondary" Rousseau, who quarrelled for years, but who died within a few weeks of each other, as though one couldn't live without the other. A little later, French history was dominated by another comparable couple: Talleyrand-Napoleon. Talleyrand's first letters to General Bonaparte during his Italian and Egyptian campaigns are purely and simply love-letters. To the over-ripe and somewhat compromised diplomat, who had remained stubbornly entrenched in the ancien régime—his celebrated cry "Anyone who did not live under the ancient régime can never know how sweet life is" is a profession of "secondary" faith—this general of humble origins, gleaming with youthful genius, was the embodiment of a hero, a romantic *par excellence*, almost mythic in status. The passion was reciprocated. In the eyes of the young ambitious Corsican, with his ridiculous accent and airs, this representative of one of the oldest families of the nobility, the great savant of all the courts of Europe, was an ideal father, an indispensable guide and teacher of the way to power. Bit by bit their friendship deteriorated, but their grievances remained within the defined parameter of the "primary" versus the "secondary." For Napoleon, in his worst moments, Talleyrand was a morass ("You are just shit in a silk stocking"). For his part Talleyrand thought Napoleon was an impulsive brute. They parted, they pined, they reconciled.

For the young reader of Baudelaire, who surrenders himself with pleasure to the envenomed charm of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the book's dedication remains enigmatic: "To the purest of poets . . . Théophile Gautier." What? How can there be any link between the limpid and manifest veracity, the frozen glitter of *Emaux et Camées*, and the fevered vertigo of *Les Fleurs du Mal?* There is no link except one of antithesis. Note the adjective "purest," deliberately chosen by the most "impure" of poets. Yes, the "secondary" Baudelaire—whose poetry is filled with echoings, presentiments and dead memories—mournfully admires the noonday light, without past or future, that washes over Gautier's poems. We may add that Théophile Gautier was to be succeeded by strong "primary" descendants: Leconte de Lisle, Hérédia, Valéry and Saint-John Perse; the solar lineage, as it were, of the anti-Baudelaireans.

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Half a century later, Baudelaire's dedication to Gautier would be echoed by Paul Valéry's dedication of *La Jeune Parque* (1917) to André Gide, an homage of the "primary" to the "secondary."[9] But while the epithet "purest" in Baudelaire's hands highlighted the "primary" character of the dedicatee, Valéry's note underlines his own "primary" character by describing his poem as an "exercise," which means that he considers it as a process in which only the act itself has value, and what that act produces — the poem — is treated as insignificant debris. This is the cult of the present moment pushed to its extreme limit.

Let us return briefly to Proust, because his work counterbalances Valéry's, and the two bodies of work are equally strong, even though they are starkly contrasted. Proust excavates labyrinths, wraps himself in light and dark, awakens far off echoes. Nostalgia, jealousy and remorse work in his heart like a leaven. With Valéry, on the other hand, the great light of the Mediterranean sweeps aside lymphatic humors and the shadows of an inward life. It is the triumph of Apollonian architecture against the backdrop of the blue serene. Compared to these two younger sons, whose lives were static and in the end quite accidential to their work — and the work is all that matters — André Gide seems like a traveller whose every point of departure engenders a book in his own image. His dynamism contrasts with their stability. It is legitimate to define his development in terms of these two polarities which never ceased to haunt him. In Gide's *Journal* Proust is mentioned twenty-two times, almost always with reservations; Paul Valéry seventy-nine times, and always in a tone of most admiring friendship. Like Proust, Gide was born in Paris, and like Proust he died there. One should not exaggerate the importance of this fact, but Gide's journey can be seen as a constant effort to distance himself from the "secondary" character embodied by Proust and to get closer to the "primary" character of a Paul Valéry or an Henri Ghéon.

Between Proust's background and Gide's there are numerous and frequently contrasting analogies. Gide was eleven when his father died of tuberculosis. From then on he became the victim of his mother, who was sour-tempered, puritanical, and inclined to take advantage. His relations with his parents are therefore the inverse of Proust's with his. Gide idealized his father and claimed to be like

[9]"To André Gide. For many years I abandoned the art of verse: attempting to apply myself again, I did this exercise which I dedicate to you."

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him. He struggled bitterly against his mother, who was, according to Jean Delay, "a classical heroine out of Corneille, and the dominating mother of the psychoanalysts." Now it is clear that Gide, a moralist so dedicated he would risk his life for a cause he thought just, in fact took after his mother much more than his father, who was no doubt a rather foppish character. Paradoxically, it is to his mother that he owes all his strength and manliness. He could have inverted the famous lines where Goethe says that he got from his father "his upright bearing" and from his mother "his easy going nature and taste for dreaming." In the meantime, he spent his childhood and adolescence hiding under the skirts of women who were candle-snuffers. Gide's childhood can be summed up in one word, a Proustian word: introversion. Egotistical, withdrawn, secretive, this only son found nothing but himself interesting in life and as his friend Albert Démarest said, at the very time (alas) when there was nothing very interesting about him. From the poverty of this barren childhood to the Biblical epigraph of *The Immoralist*—"I praise Thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made"—there is a lengthy development, an endless journey about which nothing is clear except its geographical direction: towards the South, towards Africa. But there is also courage, selflessness, passion, and the exaltation of denial. In diametric opposition to Bossuet's *Treatise on Concupiscence* already mentioned, he creates an art of living which in one passionate stroke fuses pleasure with beauty, devotion, asceticism, sensuality. He was the first *engagé* writer of his time (the only one, if the risks he took are compared with the comfort that people like Aragon, Malraux, Camus and other such Sartres built around themselves) and he deliberately identified himself with a range of causes he believed just. He began with *Corydon* by attacking heterosexual tyranny, certain he would share the fate of Oscar Wilde, who had been destroyed by Victorian society. Then he threw in his lot with the communists. Discovering the realities of Stalinism he broke with them—where Louis Guilloux, who had made the same journey, immured himself in abject silence. In 1912, he took pains to serve as a juror in the court of Assizes so that he could criticize French justice in full knowledge of the facts. In 1925, he undertook a ten-month journey to the Congo and Chad, in circumstances so hazardous that Claudel jubilantly raised the possibility of disaster ("He's leaving for French Equatorial Africa with the idea that he may never return." Later he adds this telling note: "This letter dates from 1925. It was the last meeting I had with that unfor-

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tunate man."). And naturally he brought back from this trip an inflammatory dossier on colonialism.

A constant factor in Gide's life was his readiness to face up to discomfort and his willingness to make enemies on all fronts at once. Now the surprising paradox about these battles was the depth of happiness, not to say sensuality, that they veiled and even nourished. Gide had nothing of the militant Jacobin who stubbornly adheres to his fixed idea and tramples, without even noticing, all the riches of the earth. In his fervid search for happiness, his incomparable genius was to transmute, at least twice, powers which had seemed destined for a totally different use. These are above all the "virtues" of his mother—energy, selflessness, courage—which she had used principally to destroy her own life and her family's, but which Gide was able to turn into abundant sources of strength. The case of Gide and his mother is the perfect example of how freedom may act on an hereditary legacy. A detestable and detested inheritance which he neither conquers nor represses but benignly inverts.

More than anything else it is his double-edged reading of the Bible which amazes us. Born into the bondage of the Calvinist dispensation he was stifled under the weight of the good book from which his masters could draw only a death's head morality. Then he discovered Africa, the African sun, the explosive awakening of his senses and his flesh. And he realized that the Bible and the Gospels were *also* desert books, handbooks for living with the sands and the stones, the palm-groves with their singing waters. So there was nothing in the substance of this viaticum that he had to cast out. There was to be no break in his life-line. Between *The Notebooks of André Walter* (which is larded with biblical quotations) and *Saul* or *The Return of the Prodigal*, the use of scripture forms an unbroken continuity. It was only the climate that changed: on one side Normandy, with its rain and cold, on the other the blazing, pure dryness of the desert. In various ways this question of climate was always on Gide's mind, just as it preoccupied Nietzsche whose continual travels had no other motive. Humorously enough Gide would end up attacking the mountain and the fir tree as symbols of the repressive creed of his childhood.

Andermatt, 27 January, 1912

Here I am again in this land "that God created to be horrible" (Montesquieu). The admiration of mountains is an inven-

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> tion of Protestantism. Strange confusion on the part of brains incapable of art; between the lofty and the beautiful. Switzerland: a wonderful reservoir of energy; one has to go down how far? to find abandon and grace, laziness and voluptuousness again, without which neither art nor wine is possible. If of the tree the mountains make a fir, you can imagine what they can do with man. Aesthetics and ethics of conifers.
>
> The fir and the palm tree: those two extremes.

Now it is clear that topographically and climatically the Bible has a greater affinity with the palm tree than with the fir tree, whatever the Calvinists may say. All of Gide's work was one long effort to take the Scriptures away from the fir trees and to restore them to the palm groves.

As we have said, Paul Valéry was the first "beacon" to guide Gide in his journey to conquer the "primary." But this direction remained hypothetical and somewhat nominal because at another level there was Valéry's comprehensive negativity, his "anorexia" which we have already discussed. In this way the two dichotomies overlapped and balanced each other. His "cult of the intellect" marked out Valéry as a "primary" of the cerebral type. The Mediterranean inspired the nihilistic philosophy of his *Cimitière marin*, so opposite to the gluttonous quest of *Fruits of the Earth* ("your little Baedecker," he said to Gide). And so Gide never stopped defending himself against the corrosive action which Valéry's brain imposed on everything it touched.

> I receive Paul Valéry's visit. Charming visit, but it leaves me exhausted.
>
> *
>
> Yesterday I spent almost three hours with him. Afterwards nothing was left standing in my mind . . . After such a "conversation" everything in my head is in a state of havoc . . . Moreover I never argue with him; he merely strangles me and I struggle back.
>
> *
>
> How could it be surprising if, after having disenchanted the world around him, after having strained his wits to lose interest in so many things, he is bored!
>
> *
>
> He is more and more incapable of listening to others and of taking into consideration what would interrupt his thought. His speech is more and more rapid and indistinct . . . He talks again

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> of his '*tædium vitæ*', which at moments becomes a physical suffering, an unbearable nervous and muscular anguish. What am I saying?—at moments? . . . This is a state in which he finds himself, he says, nine days out of ten.
>
> *
>
> He repeats to me the fact that, for many years now, he has written only on order and urged on by a need for money.
>
> "That is to say that, for some time, you have written nothing for your own pleasure?"
>
> "For my own pleasure?" he continues. "But my pleasure consists precisely in writing *nothing*. I should have done something other than writing, for my own pleasure. No, no; I have never written anything, and I never write anything, save under compulsion, forced to, and cursing against it."
>
> *
>
> By very different paths to be sure, I constantly agree with him and subscribe to almost everything he writes, for which I most often feel nothing but an unlimited admiration.
>
> *
>
> Valéry's system involves a sort of austerity (and this is what makes him so admirable in my eyes) and renunciation of which I do not feel at all capable.
>
> *
>
> I experience nothing but joy in noting his incontrovertible superiority and his widespread influence, which are tempered by the most charming graciousness. I hold myself to be but very little in comparison with him, but have learned not to suffer from this. He no longer stands in my way; I have accomplished my work on a different plane from his—which I understand too well and admire too much not to admit that that work of mine has no place in his system and no value in his eyes.[10]

We could, it is true, ask ourselves if Valéry's greatest failing was not precisely to find himself empty-handed when faced with Gide's work and goodness knows how many others'. Isn't the rationale for any "system" that it should encompass and account for everything? The fact is that Valéry's technical and purely intellective "primariness," although it did give Gide some sort of elevating and stern "lesson," could not respond to the force of his sensual nature or his desires. Nor was there any lack of "primary" characters in the young Gide's

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[10]Extracts are taken from *The Journals of André Gide, 1889–1949*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Secker and Warburg: London, 1947–49).

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entourage. In terms of "secondary" people in his small social circle (with the important exception of Proust) the only possible candidate was Charles du Bos, a touching character but often mocked. Whereas those "primary" men Pierre Louÿs and Oscar Wilde had such great luster! But there was a third friend to whom Gide looked for complicity and passion, the model of an irrepressible thirst for life—everything was completely alien to Valéry—and the man in question is Henri Ghéon. Henri Ghéon's "primary" nature was vital, full of feeling, visceral, carnal. It was his naivete and openness, his jovial exuberance, the way he seemed one of nature's own that Gide took to in Ghéon. "A faun wild with friendliness," he said of him. He was a sort of uproarious Bluebeard: "Two eyes blazing in a beaming face; a square beard, short, dark and thick; florid cheeks; a gleaming scalp. He flashes me a look at once tender, cruel and friendly. He showers me with extravagant compliments. While speaking, he gesticulates, splutters, and lets out high-pitched whinnies at every instant. You can feel him perpetually drunk with existence." That is how Roger Martin du Gard portrayed him. For Gide he was a living example of how to accept himself and others with joy. "Ghéon's openness consoles me for all my hypocrisies. He has such admirable strength and health." In the spring of 1899, committing the typically "secondary" sin of making a pilgrimage to North Africa, to the places of his past happiness, Gide wrote to Ghéon: "My mistake is to chase after a lost emotion, to try to relive past time, to rekindle an old flame." In 1902 *The Immoralist* appeared with the following dedication, *To Henri Ghéon, my true friend.* For the third time, we come across a major work whose dedication is in homage to a "primary" life. A "true friend" is exactly what Ghéon would be to Gide for years. They travelled together, in Italy, in Africa. They discovered that they had things in common, for instance, the gift of tears. "All my most intense artistic emotions," Gide wrote, "are invariably accompanied by tears, to the great amazement of those nearby if I am at a museum or a concert. I remember some young English girls overcome with laughter in the San Marco convent in Florence when they saw me streaming with tears in front of Angelico's great fresco. My friend Ghéon, accompanying me at the time, was crying too and I must admit that the spectacle of our two downpours would have been very funny indeed!"

But it was especially the hunt for boys which brought them together. They headed off on nocturnal expeditions around Les Halles, or along the boulevards, and they tried to solicit around

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swimming pools and beaches in Normandy. Gide introduced Ghéon to North Africa. Their correspondence is so brimming with intimacies and amazing tales that Ghéon protests in mock horror at the idea that it might one day be published: "Don't worry about your letter, it will be buried along with those that follow it; do likewise with mine. Think of it! The day when they publish our secret correspondence!" And they did, in 1976.

But there is always time and its vicissitudes, the slow wearing down and the brutal assaults. Poor Ghéon could not endure the test of time. The 1914–18 war, in which he served as a doctor, took him unawares and dealt a blow to his grand appetite for life and for things of the flesh. What he saw, heard, and did, lancet in hand, forever cast a shadow over the "bearded satyr" and strangled his great Rabelaisian laughter. He turned to Catholicism of the most sanctimonious kind and parted from his former "true friend." In 1917, he visited Gide who noted in his *Journal*:

> Ghéon has taken on a resemblance to the good vicar of Cuverville . . . The same intonations; the same absentminded and benevolent attention; the same provisional agreement followed by the same withdrawal; even the same indefinable absence . . . I stiffen myself against grief, but it seems to me at times that Ghéon is more lost to me than if he were dead. He is neither changed nor absent; he is confiscated.

We can perhaps add to the four dichotomies we have tried out on the "Gide case" a fifth binary key to comprehend and shed light on them. In following the course of Gide's life you cannot help admiring the man. A successful life, that is the image which positively dominates. No wrong turns, or if there are they seem fated, like his marriage with Madeleine Rondeaux. A measured progression. And naturally a long life too, in which old age shows no sign of decrepitude, and which forced those who knew him to use that wonderful and mysterious word, *wisdom*. This is why we must judge kindly those successors of Gide whom premature and accidental death deprived of this significant dimension. I refer to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Albert Camus, who died at forty-four and forty-seven respectively, and who can seem a little like the anaemic heterosexual offspring of the grand progenitor. As far as one can judge from what we have, they would probably have aged well, because their work possesses that very virtue which constitutes Gide's greatness: a kind of

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consubstantiality with the passing of time. In contrast to Proust, who turned his back on the present in order to plunge more deeply into familial archaeology, or to Paul Valéry, clinging anxiously to the ecstasy of the eternal moment, Gide knew how to make Time part of his own system. And clearly this is the fifth dichotomy of which the other four are expressions. The intimacy principle, "orexia," the "primary" character slowly asserting itself over an original "secondary" character, his physical appearance modelling itself on the work through the years—these are just various aspects of a predilection which takes the form of making oneself Time's accomplice, rather than trying to conquer or escape it.

This predilection finds its purest expression in the dialogue at the end of *Theseus*, Gide's last work. Theseus, the embodiment of the hero who has been able to integrate Time into his work, finds himself in the presence of Oedipus, a noble and prestigious wreck.

> "In Oedipus," [says Theseus] "I recognized a nobility equal to my own; this beaten man's misfortunes could only make him the greater in my eyes. Certainly I was always and everywhere triumphant; but on a level which, compared to Oedipus, seemed merely human, and somehow inferior . . . What was it then? Why did he accept his defeat? Had he not even contributed to it by gouging out his eyes? In this atrocious self-mutilation, there was something that I could not begin to understand."

"One must stop seeing the world in order to see God." In the end, it is by this profession of faith that Oedipus justifies his action. The sensuous Theseus cries out against it and, in his wake, the denial finds its echo in all of Gide's work, beginning of course with *Fruits of the Earth* which opens with the command: "Do not seek, Nathanael, to find God in any one place but in everything."

Gide's whole *oeuvre* is a celebration of light, in defiance of all false prophets with their gouged-out eyes.

Translated from the French by
Penny Hueston and Colin Nettelbeck

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Stanislaw Baranczak

A RUSSIAN ROULETTE

"I'd like a couple of books which would give me some idea of contemporary Soviet fiction." Anyone who would approach an American bookseller with a demand like this is bound to leave the store with a bag of books more or less as heterogeneous and mutually incomparable as the six that lie in front of me right now. These are books published almost simultaneously in English and over the span of not more than twenty-odd years in the original Russian, but to read them one after another is an experience which makes one question the very semantic validity of each of the three words contained in the label "contemporary Soviet fiction." If by "contemporary" we are to understand the literature of the last thirty years, it is impossible to overlook the startling cognitive and aesthetic differences between works representative of the post-Stalinist "thaw" or the beginnings of *samizdat* and the major novels of the late seventies to early eighties. The term "Soviet" is a particularly confusing misnomer: each of these six novels deals with Soviet reality, but out of the six writers only one both published his work and lived all his life in the Soviet Union, another lived there but wrote his novel with no hope of having it officially published, yet another's work was officially circulated but afterwards he fled to the West, and the other three authors wrote their books, completely or in part, while living in the Soviet Union but published them only abroad and are now themselves living in exile. Finally, even the broad term "fiction" seems hardly applicable to each of these six books in the same manner: ironically, the one among them which is formally the closest to the nonfictional "literature of facts" reads like a utopian fairytale, whereas the one that apparently reaches the farthest extremes of grotesquely absurd distortion offers, in fact, the most compelling reflection of Soviet reality. The paradoxes of chronology, cultural geography and literary genre all conspire to overwhelm the American reader of what is sold as "contempory Soviet fiction" with an impression of a puzzlingly wide range of approaches and styles, covering the vast space between the panoramic epic and the self-centered lyric, between the moralists' sacred truths and the mockers' topsy-turvy blasphemies, between the likes of Alexander Solzhenitsyn or

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Vasily Grossman on the one hand and Venedikt Erofeyev or Sasha Sokolov on the other.

In my six-book sampler of recently translated "contemporary Soviet fiction," Anatolii Kuznetsov's *The Journey* (New Horizon Press) is a specimen both the least contemporary and the most Soviet. Its original Russian publication actually marked the debut of the writer (1929–1979) who was to make himself better known later on, first by the appearance of the best-selling war novel *Babi Yar* in 1966, and then by his much-publicized act of defection to England in 1969 (after which he changed his name, revised *Babi Yar*, and condemned his early writing).

First published in the liberal journal *Youth* in 1957, *The Journey* was considered in its time one of the signs of the cultural "thaw." From today's perspective, however, it looms rather as a symbol of how strictly limited the official "thaw" was and how little food for thought was enough in 1957 to make the starved Soviet reader happy. Suffice it to say that *The Journey* is a book on Siberia in which not a single word about Siberian labor camps is uttered. Instead, we have a book based on false pretenses: outwardly, it appears to be a work of nonfiction based on the quasi-documentary formula of a writer's travel notebook; inherently, it is a belated example of that most fairy-tale-like genre of Socialist Realism, "the production novel." The first-person narrator, a graduate of a Moscow high school and member of the Komsomol, rejects the alluring prospects of higher education and city-based career and sets off by train to Siberia. He ends up in Irkutsk as a concrete worker at the dam construction site on the Angara. Unaccustomed to tough work conditions and unfit for physical labor, he falls seriously ill and even experiences a moment of doubt, but he is rescued by the tirade of his friend, an idealistic Komsomol member, and promptly reaches the conclusion that "real happiness—is happiness in work." Other workers at the site undergo a similar transformation: in the beginning the brigade still has its share of sluggards, drunkards and swindlers, but in the end each of them has matured so much that he is ready to throw himself with his cement truck in the water of the Angara to precipitate the dam's completion. At the same time, the heroic ordeal of the protagonist is didactically contrasted with the portrayal of his former schoolmate Viktor who has chosen the easy way of a careerist and cynic: he stays in Moscow, studies at the university, wears trendy clothes and indulges himself in rock and roll.

Its doctrinaire schematism aside, Kuznetsov's tale cannot help

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but offer, be it deliberately or inadvertently, some hints at the existence of Soviet reality's dark side. Behind the marble facade of the "great building site of Socialism" there lurk the undeniable facts which the reader is compelled to realize in the course of the narrative: exploitation of the worker, chronic mismanagement and corruption, contempt of the individual, brutality in human relations, the depressing dullness of everyday life. Of course, even if Kuznetsov's narrator realizes these facts along with the reader, he hastens to emphasize that these are remnants of the prerevolutionary past or individual faults of the people who do not measure up yet to the demands of the ideology. To blame the system would certainly be too much to expect from a work published in the Soviet press in 1957.

But it is not only a matter of censorship. Kuznetsov's narrator is himself a sincere believer, an example of "the new Soviet man" who is simply unable to think and speak in categories other than those dictated by the official ideology. This is especially noticeable in his language, which shows him time and again as a victim of the Stalinist verbal machine: as a matter of course, this young man qualifies poor women peddling sunflower seeds as "speculators," describes a peasant lad who is furious after being robbed on the train as "avaricious and a *kulak*," and dreams about cleansing the Socialist world of "parasites"; needless to say, he still takes for granted the rather infamous slogan "If you're not with us, you're against us." One could understand the reasons why *The Journey* was acclaimed as a literary event in 1957 in the Soviet Union; read in America in 1986, it is nothing more than a piece of bad propagandistic literature, made even worse by the stilted, unnatural language of the translation (which often, particularly in the dialogues, seems to be a mechanical rendition of Russian colloquialisms and idioms into literal English).

It is almost indecent to speak in one breath of Kuznetsov's debut and Vasily Grossman's famous last novel *Forever Flowing* (Harper and Row); the latter is an infinitely more mature, humane and honest work of an authentic writer. Even though these two books were produced during virtually the same period of Soviet literary history (Grossman had been working on his novel from 1955 to 1963; he died a year later), they are so different in all their basic aspects, one might think they were written on two different planets. Grossman, a man not only a generation older (born in 1905) but also much more harshly tested by history's adversities (he served as a war correspondent and a few years later was viciously slandered in the

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1949 anti-Semitic campaign against the "cosmopolites"), was one of the first Soviet writers to recognize the fundamental inhumanity of both the apparatus of power and its ideological basis. This is clearly documented by his war epic *Life and Fate*, but even more so by *Forever Flowing*, which stands out as a shatteringly unequivocal indictment of the more than forty years of Soviet rule. Grossman views it as founded at the very outset—Lenin's period fully included—on a total "absence of freedom" and thus preserving "that link between progress and slavery which has historically been Russia's curse." Chronologically speaking, the development of this kind of unflinching vision parallels the similar evolution of Solzhenitsyn, even though it is only recently that Grossman has been posthumously discovered in the West (*Forever Flowing* was first published in English in 1972, but *Life and Fate* appeared only this year).

In its initial scenes, *Forever Flowing* promises to be just a realistic novel about the early years of the post-Stalinist era. Ivan Grigorevich returns to Moscow after thirty years spent in a labor camp. He returns a forgotten and lonely man; even the woman he loved had stopped writing to him long ago. We witness his first encounters with the reality beyond the barbed wire: his uneasy reunion with a relative who in the meantime made a rather dubious career, his accidental meeting of the man who did him in thirty years ago, etcetera. The society that enjoys the long-awaited "thaw" strikes Ivan Grigorevich as one not very much changed since the years of terror and actually well adjusted to oppression: it has already given up its longing for genuine freedom, and there is no spiritual difference between the worlds inside and outside the camps. The protagonist moves to a small town in Southern Russia, where he takes up a worker's job and falls in love with his landlady, a war widow, herself a victim of Stalinism. In the ensuing part of the novel the details of the plot become more and more sketchy: the book's entire second half is a series of dialogues and meditations of Ivan Grigorevich and Anna Sergeyevna on the issues of Russian history, the nature of the Soviet system, moral responsibility, and the irrepressibility of human striving towards freedom.

Grossman's political and ethical outlook, based on a simple but consistent assumption that the need for freedom is something inherent in human nature and that "everything inhuman is senseless and worthless," has lost nothing in value over the years; nor have his images of life under Lenin and Stalin (in particular, his account of the years of "collectivization") lost their staggering power. Con-

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sidered as a novel, though, *Forever Flowing* seems to be a work as crippled as it is ambitious. The plot, begun in a realistic vein, is apparently unable to contain the scope and carry the burden of the book's problematics, and Grossman, as it were, discards it midway through in favor of a straightforward discourse in which the two protagonists serve merely as mouthpieces for the author's own opinions.

One is tempted to see in this, however, not so much an artistic failure as evidence of Grossman's honesty as a writer—his indirect expression of distrust in the traditional instruments of the realistic novel. Juxtaposed with the bestiality and absurdity of history, the authoritative role of an omniscient narrator—that of a rational explainer, organizer of the plot, supplier of moralistic instruction—could indeed seem impossible to retain in a longer run. Thus, Grossman's narrator is omniscient so long as he confines himself to presenting the novel's setting and initial situations. It is characteristic that he abandons this role for the first time in Chapter Seven, which is focused on the issue of the guilt and moral responsibility of people who in the years of Stalinism served as informers. At this point, there is no use for the narrator's authoritative explanation or unequivocal moralistic commentary, precisely because one of the chief evils of totalitarian terror is that under its circumstances the issues of guilt and responsibility become ambiguous and blurred. Henceforth, the figure of an omniscient narrator appears as increasingly inadequate, and the only way Grossman can carry the weight of the issues raised in his novel is ultimately through direct, essayistic rather than novelistic, discourse.

As such, *Forever Flowing* remains not only a profound and honest analysis of the phenomenon of Soviet totalitarianism, but also an important indication of the vicious circle in which the tradition of literary realism has found itself in our age. On the one hand, the enormity of human suffering under totalitarian systems demands realistic description more than any other approach; on the other, the authoritative role of the realistic narrator, which so often accompanies this approach, seems today more inconceivable than ever before.

A writer who seems to have been more acutely aware of this conundrum than most of his contemporaries—and who, while remaining a true-blue realist, found perhaps the most artistically satisfying way out of it—is Yuri Trifonov (1925–1981), whose last novel, *The Old Man* (Simon and Schuster), is a fitting culmination of his unique career. Trifonov was perhaps the only Soviet writer in the recent decades who managed to attain the maximum of honesty in his

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critical depiction of Soviet reality while also managing to stay on the surface of official literary life. All his major novels, including *The Old Man*, have appeared in Soviet periodicals and through Soviet publishing houses, even though in most cases their publication could seem a grave blunder on the part of the censor. Of course, there was a price to pay: especially when compared with works written "for the author's desk-drawer" or for uncensored publication, such as Grossman's full-scale investigation of the Soviet system's crimes, Trifonov's books are characterized by a certain deliberate limitation of the field of vision and even by occasional instances of Aesopian language. It might be argued, however, that what appears to have been self-censorship was in fact Trifonov's individual way of focusing on what he knew and understood best. He didn't have to write openly about Stalinist terror, Siberian camps or dissidents' trials. His unique role was to specialize in meticulous portrayals of the mentality of an average Soviet citizen; and these portrayals provided the reader with an even more horrifying insight into that society's distorted system of moral values than many of the works circulating in the *samizdat*.

The Old Man is Trifonov's most ambitious and successful attempt of that kind. In this novel, the roots of contemporary evil are discovered, even more unequivocally than in some of his previous works such as *The House on the Embankment*, in the very historic beginnings of the Soviet system and in its inherent immorality. It was the Revolution itself, along with its idea of "historical necessity," that first exempted the individual from a moral responsibility for his actions. The novel's plot, in its contemporary layer (which takes place near Moscow in the oppressively hot summer of 1973), is a story of the last weeks in the life of Pavel Evgrafovich, a veteran of the Revolution and Civil War, who shares his shabby suburban *dacha* with the families of his son and daughter. The plot revolves around the complicated maneuvers, legal and semilegal, which several members of the local housing cooperative, including Pavel Evgrafovich's children, initiated in order to obtain another cottage, left after the death of a certain widow (who, incidentally, had herself taken possession of it during the years of Stalin's terror by forcing out a family of an arrested "enemy of the people"). At the same time, a letter received by Pavel Evgrafovich from his old love Anna Konstantinovna ignites a series of flashbacks, in which he recalls the story of Migulin, a Cossack commander of the pro-Bolshevik regiment in the Civil War and Anna's husband. As it appears, Pavel betrayed Migulin by testifying as a

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witness for the prosecution in his show trial in 1919 and admitting the "possibility" that he had been part of an anti-Communist conspiracy.

These two lines of the plot, the contemporary and the retrospective, constitute the novel. But Trifonov's art lies in his subtle way of making them seemingly independent from each other (Pavel is not interested in the intrigues concerning the cottage, just as his neighbors and family are not interested in his Civil War memories) while at the same time suggesting their deeper, ethical affinity. It is significant that even Pavel, who seems to stand morally a little bit above the thoroughly corrupt and materialistic younger generation, never realizes the individual guilt that lay in his act of betrayal. In the final analysis, he too turns out to have been contaminated by the germ of moral nihilism which had spawned the bloody immoralism of the Revolution as well as the greedy immoralism of the average Soviet citizen in modern times. Trifonov, with all his dislike for overt moralistic instruction and black-and-white divisions, is a moralist in the sense that, for him, acts of evil are never isolated. On the contrary, they are always rife with consequences—including those that come to the surface of social life generations later. One of the characters in his novel expresses that idea by realizing that "life was a system in which everything, in some mysterious way and according to some higher plan, was interlaced." This concept of the interdependence of various components of reality is reflected in Trifonov's superb narrative technique (well rendered in Jacqueline Edwards's and Mitchell Schneider's finely crafted translation). As I have mentioned, he found his own solution to the dilemma of contemporary realism: in his novels, he worked out a highly complex system of shifting viewpoints and the protagonists' indirect self-characterization, thanks to which realistic depiction is preserved without the overbearing presence of an authoritative, omniscient narrator. *The Old Man*, a nearly perfect example of such technique, is a triumph of both the moralist and the artist.

Alas, this cannot possibly be said about another apparently realistic work, which copes with the same dilemma only to fail in both an ethical and aesthetic sense. At the outset, Sergei Dovlatov's *The Zone* (Alfred A. Knopf) seems to offer a unique perspective—it deals with the theme of Soviet prison camps, seen, however, not from the usual viewpoint of an inmate but from that of a camp guard. (The author, born in Russia in 1941 and an American emigré since 1978, was, as a young man, drafted into the army and sent to serve as a guard in a camp for criminal offenders.) This con-

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cept is perhaps not so revolutionary as that of the brilliant novella *Faithful Ruslan* by Georgy Vladimov, in which the world of a camp was seen through the eyes of a guard dog. Nevertheless, it does sound promising, and it's a pity that Dovlatov's book does not live up to its promise—in fact, it disappoints not only in comparison with Vladimov, but also with more traditional prison camp literature, like that of Solzhenitsyn or Varlam Shalamov.

The Zone is actually a sequence of short stories, interspersed with the author's letters to his Russian émigré publisher. The book is presented as a sort of work in progress, which builds up as the U.S.-based author receives fragments of his manuscripts left behind in Russia before his emigration and now sent to him clandestinely by his friends. But the function of the letters is not merely to explain the book's genesis or provide a framework which would counterbalance its fragmentary construction. In addition, the letters are used as an opportunity to comment on the stories themselves. And here's the rub: Dovlatov errs in overtly expounding the ideology of his stories instead of incorporating it in their narrative structure. If we read, for example, his explicit statements on the analogies between the inner world of the camp and the outer world of Soviet reality, this observation strikes us as perhaps true but banal. It might not be the case, had we come to the same conclusion ourselves, compelled to do so by a convincing plot of a story.

In a sense, then, Dovlatov turns Trifonov's technique inside out: he amplifies the overbearing voice of an authoritative author-narrator instead of letting the reality presented speak for itself. This is an aesthetic as well as ethical error, since the presence of the authoritative outside commentary also muffles the moral impact of the stories. Dovlatov would have shocked the reader more if he left him face-to-face with the narrator-character who is a camp guard and looks at the camp from his own specific perspective. Tadeusz Borowski, a Polish classic of camp literature, did not hesitate to do just that in his Auschwitz stories: his narrator, a camp *Vorarbeiter* bearing Borowski's first name, was able to stir up a moral uneasiness in the reader precisely because he had no qualms about his role as helper to the oppressors. Dovlatov, on the other hand, confronts us with guards who, as conscripts, have been forced to perform their unpleasant duties and are, in fact, no less unhappy than the inmates they guard (and sometimes shoot). This may be, in some cases, psychologically true, but it makes the ethical difficulties inherent in

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such a perspective melt into thin air. In the final analysis, both the guards and the prisoners appear to be victims of the system in almost the same sense and to almost the same extent. The old Socialist Realist formula "It's not the system but the people who are to blame," has thus undergone a complete turnabout: Dovlatov seems to say that it's only the system that is guilty, whereas all the people are its blameless victims.

This six-pack of Soviet fiction makes me think of a literary version of Russian roulette, in which a reader can never be sure whether the next turn of the gun's barrel will deliver an authentic charge or a misfire. The last two novels in this collection, both written in the Soviet Union in the mid-seventies by authors who now live in the U.S.A., are just such genuine explosions of creative talent. They may be not equal in value, but what they share is their new approach to the dilemma of traditional realism. Both authors, like Trifonov, reject the authoritative voice of an omniscient narrator, but instead of creating a polyphonic mosaic of different points of view, both of them prefer to focus on an individual hero or an individual voice. Trifonov's striving for objectivity thus finds its counterbalance in narrative subjectivity, which is, of course, not without effect for the general vision of reality presented in these novels.

Vassily Aksyonov's *The Burn* (Random House, Inc.) is his *opus magnum*, the Western publication of which in 1980 earned him his expulsion from the Soviet Union; it appears in English only now, one can guess, because of the enormity of labor required of this particular novel's translator due to its very length and the stylistic variety of its original Russian. The first pages of this huge work make the reader plunge into what seems to be total disarray: individual characters and plot lines appear only to disappear again; the narration shifts from first-person to third-person and back; the nature of the motivation for specific scenes (rational or fantastic) is far from certain. Only after some time are we able to grasp the underlying principle of construction: in complete disregard for traditional realistic rules, the novel has five chief protagonists who are five different personages while *also* being the same person. These five are a popular jazz saxophonist, a scientist involved in some mysterious military research, a dissident writer, an unorthodox sculptor, and a doctor who has discovered the so-called "Lymph-D," described as "liquid soul or something like that." All five live in Moscow in the early seventies and their paths sometimes even cross. In fact, however,

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each of them is just a different grown-up extension of one single character, Tolya von Steinbock, son of a Russian father and Jewish mother, whose adolescence (shown in a series of half-realistic, half-nightmarish flashbacks) was spent in Magadan during Stalin's last years, where his mother, released from camp, served her sentence of internal exile. The unity of the five characters (in the novel's last part they again converge into one personage called The Victim) is emphasized by the fact that they share the same patronymic, they have the same acquaintances, they belong to the same milieu of Moscow artists and intellectuals and, most importantly, to the same generation. In both its retrospective and contemporary layers, *The Burn* is indeed a portrait of a certain generation—of the generation of people, now in their fifties, who have lived through a Stalinist childhood, the euphoria of 1956, and the gradually increasing disappointment and cynicism of the later years.

Oddly enough, however, the novel's central device, which makes such a collective portrayal of a generation possible, is also the cause of the book's chief shortcomings. The dissociation of Tolya von Steinbock into five different contemporary characters is an innovative trick, but it confronts Aksyonov with the necessity of endowing each of these five with his own characteristics and more or less independent life. This is perhaps too much to carry on for over five hundred pages, and the reader suspects on numerous occasions that certain fantastic developments in the plot stem not so much from the author's absurdist vision of contemporary Soviet life as from his pressing need to differentiate the five characters and give them some personal traits. In contrast, it is the relatively most realistic (and, incidentally, most autobiographic) layer of the novel's plot—the story of Tolya's coming of age in Magadan—that engages the reader most. It is so not necessarily because this is the part closest in style to traditional realism; rather, Tolya is the only character in the novel whose inner drama—his being torn apart between longing for freedom and love on the one hand and the desire to be like everybody else on the other—is truly convincing. Compared to him, all his five "extensions," with their more or less imaginary adventures in a world ranging from Moscow's salons to its detoxification stations, seem to be devoid of authentic inner conflicts, and their despair demonstrated by superhuman abuse of sex and alcohol reads almost like something out of the melodramas of Françoise Sagan. Chaotic, overflowing, unbelievably uneven, at turns rambling and farfetched or

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incisive and compelling, Aksyonov's *The Burn* may well be *the* novel of his generation and is certainly a work of an enormously talented writer. But it never attains the degree of artistic cohesion that would make it something more than a testimony to its times.

In this company of six, it is Yuz Aleshkovsky who, along with Trifonov, turns out to be a decisive winner—even more so as *Kangaroo* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) is his first novel to appear in English, whereas Trifonov's reputation in the West has been fairly well established for quite a while. It does not mean that these two writers have much in common. Indeed, it would be hard to find two more different novelists. While Trifonov has often been seen as a modern successor of Chekhov, Aleshkovsky's work refers back to the neglected tradition of Andrei Platonov: what interests him is not so much psychological or factual realism as the autonomous reality of language, treated as something even more important than the external reality it reflects.

At the same time, Aleshkovsky is a great writer of the absurd; in that sense, his literary pedigree reaches back to the stories of Abram Tertz (Andrei Siniavski), and even farther back, to the early novels of Mikhail Bulgakov. What they all share is the method of starting with an apparently absurd situation but dealing with it and developing it along the lines that are completely in accord with the logic of Soviet life. In *Kangaroo*'s case, the logic is that of Stalinism *anno* 1947. The first-person narrator, Fan Fanych, a notorious con artist, in a book-length monologue relates his story to a friend with a similar background. Well-known to the KGB, he nonetheless had never been imprisoned before 1947 because he had been kept in reserve as the ideal defendant in a long-planned, great "trial of the future." Finally arrested, he was offered a choice of several different indictments; in order to make the prosecution's task as difficult as possible, he chose the most absurd one, the scenario composed by a malfunctioning KGB computer, according to which he raped and murdered an aged kangaroo in the Moscow Zoo "on a night between July 14, 1789, and January 9, 1905." From that hilarious premise, everything in the plot develops with the infallible consistency of the Stalinist system, in which the prosecution is always right (even if the crime has never been committed) and the case is not closed until the defendant himself confesses his guilt. Fan Fanych is joined in his cell by a tutor, an expert in marsupials; he is drugged so that he can think *himself* to be a kangaroo; he plays the main role in a film pre-

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pared by his prosecutors as a chief piece of courtroom evidence; finally he is sentenced (in a huge show trial which is only a slight caricature of the Moscow trials in the 1930s), sent to a special camp for the most distinguished old Bolsheviks, and released only in the years of the "thaw." There is no shortage of fantastic ramifications in the plot (among other things, the hero contributes personally, by stealing Hitler's wallet in 1929, to the birth of Nazism; later, he is able to witness—from a rather strange vantage point—the secret proceedings at the Yalta conference) but, on the whole, one is struck by the paralyzing logic rather than imaginary character of the plot's development. Everything that happens here is just a caricatured hyperbole of what could have happened in the Stalinist reality; in fact, even the charge of raping a kangaroo is not very far from the preposterous accusations which could be heard in the real-life show trials.

But *Kangaroo* is much more than just a convex mirror which magnifies the absurdities of the Soviet system; in the original, and also to a large extent in Tamara Glenny's excellent translation, it is an orgy of linguistic mockery. The language of the monologue is a hysterically funny result of the clash between official Soviet phraseology and the monologist's own nonconformist style formed in prisons and interrogation rooms (for instance: "I told him if you subtract the enthusiasm of the twenties from the enthusiasm of the thirties, all that's left is ten years for counter-revolutionary agitation and propaganda"); thus, it provides its own, independent commentary on the nature of Soviet reality. It defines this reality as shaped not only by events and facts but also by ubiquitous *signs*—from propaganda slogans to films or portraits of the leaders—from which there is no escape; the only way for a free mind to cope with this permanent pressure is through parody, through linguistic violence, through such an abuse of official language which will overpower it and thus defeat it. Aleshkovsky's narrator may not have raped a kangaroo, but he did rape the Soviet language. His creator's offense is as serious as his artistic victory is total.

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Enrique Krauze

MEXICO: AN OUTPOST OF THE WEST

Only active volcanoes are newsworthy. During the Revolution (1910–1917) and in the twenties, Mexico attracted the attention of a wide spectrum of American society: Wall Street bankers, Hollywood filmmakers, journalists of romantic inclinations. Drawn first by the violence, and later by revolutionary promises, a number of artists and intellectuals who had become disillusioned with the American dream traveled south to play their part in the construction of a new society. Their visionary fervor was short-lived, replaced by folklore. For the next fifty years Mexico produced more postcards than news. In the midseventies, the oil crisis brought Mexico into the spotlight again. In 1982, Mexico's ballooning debt crisis carried other ominous signs in its wake: increasing illegal emigration, proximity to the Central American conflict, the risk of political instability. Suddenly, there was a simmering volcano in America's backyard.

The publication of *Distant Neighbors*[1] therefore has been timely. Alan Riding (correspondent of *The New York Times* in Mexico for a number of years) points out that the need to understand Mexico has become "a matter of self-interest and even of national security" for the United States. With the aim of making one culture more intelligible to another, of "[making] Mexico more accessible to non-Mexicans," Riding offers "a journey through the history of the country, through the minds of its people and through the diverse sectors of society": a journey which goes "beyond the surface crisis to the inner subtleties of an ancient, complex and unpredictable nation." No easy task, as Riding admits: "Mexico does not surrender its secrets willingly." *Distant Neighbors*, unfortunately, confirms this.

Portrayal is one thing, understanding another. In reality, Riding's studies of and contact with Mexican culture, history and society were of limited scope: what he legitimately portrayed with great insight was Mexico's political elite, which comprised his principal source of information. The heart of *Distant Neighbors* lies really in the tradi-

1. *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* by Alan Riding. Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

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tion of oral literature: the product of hundreds of after-dinner conversations, confessions, and even chitchat, a mixture of revelation and trivia. The work might more aptly have been subtitled: "A Portrait of the Mexican Elite."

Riding's portrait of Mexico's political elite has all the critical virtues of good reporting, but also its flaws. He shows a taste for "marketable news" (corruption, oil, the foreign debt), rather than a deeper analysis of historical and structural changes. In a portrait of the United States, one would not refer exclusively to drug addiction, urban crime, and the Vietnam War. Reality is not always scandalous. There are more valleys than volcanoes. Another problem lies in the imbalance of Riding's temporal perspective: the greatest emphasis is placed on the period from 1970 onwards, exactly coinciding with his own stay in Mexico. Whole passages are irrelevant, as if a portrait of United States politics dwelled heavily on Spiro Agnew's political accomplishments, Bert Lance's financial transactions, or Gerald Ford tripping over. Anyone who reads this book in a few years' time will need a *Who's Who*. It may stand the test of *Time*, but not of time.

While Riding's work does not go into the history and structure of the driving forces of the Mexican political system, it does reflect aspects of its inner functioning, rituals and present situation. The president, as always, stands atop the system. Despite appearances and popular beliefs, his power is not absolute. In reality, he simply forms part of a complicated network of political interests, traditions, and superstitions. His job is to reconcile them. None of the last three presidents—Diaz Ordáz, Echeverría, López Portillo—were successful in this: the first was responsible for the killing of hundreds of students in 1968; the second, with a populist rhetoric, undermined the confidence of the private sector; the third managed the economy with notorious irresponsibility and provoked the enmity of vast sectors of the upper and middle classes. Thus, the myth of the almighty president is stumbling in Mexico. The other basic element in the system is the Institutional Revolutionary Party. The PRI, made up almost corporatively of organizations of workers, peasants and bureaucrats, forms a pyramid of loyalties, inseparable from the state as in Eastern nations, though almost free of ideological dogmatism. Up until the seventies, the PRI's hegemony permitted notable political movement and the consequent division among its affiliates of positions, sinecures and all types of material advantages. Riding describes this patronage with precision. On the other hand, his idea of the PRI's present crisis

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is less exact: the internal division between young pragmatic technocrats and old populist politicians is of little importance in comparison to the image, credibility and legitimacy crisis from which the PRI is suffering, in its totality, among large sectors of the population. Riding's portrait of the elite is not always accurate: legislative and judiciary are only formal powers, mainly subjected to the executive, but the press is less docile than he suggests: although many newspapers and magazines live because of state charity (the government, furthermore, has the paper monopoly), their failing is not so much subservience as the incapacity to use their liberty with imagination, responsibility, and without ideological dogmatism: they confuse opinion with information. The long-standing alliance between workers and government, while recently unstable because of the loss in real wages, doesn't seem contingent upon the longevity of aging union leader Fidel Velázquez. In general, however, Riding's interpretations are correct: the private sector, traditionally pampered and protected, has suffered a degree of estrangement, almost a divorce from the government, since the "nationalization"—as it was called—of the banks in 1982; the Church, while contributing to stability, is indeed already a divisive force in the northern states. There are growing signs of Church intervention—which the constitution prohibits—in favor of a democratic opening contrary to the interests of the PRI. The army, apolitical and loyal, lacks both an aristocratic tradition and adequate funds, but has shown signs of disagreement with the way in which the country has been governed since 1970. The villains of the piece are the intellectuals, who are a privileged class. As in colonial times, they live in an "incestuous relationship" with the government, having renounced their responsibility to the public—independent criticism—in exchange for money, jobs and sinecures. Although there has always existed in Mexico a handful of intellectuals without either ideological dogmatism or the courtesan spirit (Daniel Cosío Villegas, José Vasconcelos, Octavio Paz are a few examples), the majority of Mexican intellectuals have exhibited a true "trahison des clercs" that is summed up by a popular epigram: "They cash in with the right and make opinions with the left."

The Left, while fragmented and unpopular, does affect foreign policy and is highly influential in academic and cultural circles, and in the press. The Right, which has a stronger and growing constituency, has been able to increase its power, especially in the North, as a result of the economic crisis. The National Action Party (PAN),

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very weak since its foundation in 1939 and almost skeletal in 1976, is now a headache for the PRI, who since 1929 has won, by fair means or foul, every major election.

One theme recurs throughout the book: corruption. Unfortunately, especially from 1970 on, Riding does not exaggerate. The bartering of influence, political patronage, embezzlement, nepotism, large-scale bribery, the purchase of union favors, press blackmail, have all prospered in Mexico. Al Capone was an amateur compared to some Mexican public servants in the period from 1970 to 1982. Ex-president López Portillo, for example, in addition to amassing an immense fortune that enables him and his extensive family to live the life of feudal lords in Europe, built a mansion over a 36,000 square-foot piece of land on the outskirts of Mexico City, named his son Planning Undersecretary ("the pride of my nepotism") and in an unprecedented act, worthy of the Caesars, named his lover Secretary of Tourism. Riding, however, considers corruption to be an idiosyncratic or historical trait of the Mexican character, which simply is not true. For long periods during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mexico had governments that were unorganized and inefficient but not corrupt. Yet Mexico is not alone in the world or in history as a nation racked by corruption: think, for example, of twentieth-century Russia and Nigeria; or, for that matter, of the island studied by Sir Lewis Namier in his famous work, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III.*

The "Mexican economic miracle" was greater than Riding would have us believe. From a predominantly rural nation of fifteen million people, without an infrastructure, Mexico has become the tenth largest Western economy, with a predominantly urban population of nearly eighty million. But Mexico was in a state of crisis from 1970 to 1982. Echeverría permitted and encouraged the geometric growth of the foreign debt (which jumped over 450 percent, to $19.6 billion between 1970 and 1976), of public expenditure, of the nation's bureaucracy (now four million people), of unproductive investment in unnecessary luxuries, of corruption, wanton wastefulness, purchase of political favors for cash, and of what was called financial populism. This geometric growth became exponential under López Portillo. What started out as an austerity government was converted with the petroleum boom into Pharaonic delirium. The economic policy of President de la Madrid was vastly different from his predecessors, but he was nonetheless a "hostage of the debt" (now $100 billion).

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The government faces a "disturbing dilemma": should it reduce its own role and open up the economy, risking perhaps political stability, or should it, despite an acute lack of resources, cling to the old but effective populist system of purchasing loyalties? In recent days, de la Madrid has leaned firmly towards the former solution.

The outline of disaster was particularly obvious in the oil industry, to which Riding devotes considerable attention. Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex), the bright star of Mexico's industrial firmament, a symbol of nationalism, has become one of the least efficient oil companies in the world. Here again, 1976 marked the watershed. Corruption increased hand-in-hand with greater exports, and the sudden and stunning increase in proven (90 billion barrels) and potential reserves (250 billion barrels). In addition to a chaotic, contaminative and unproductive expansion (whose best symbol is the useless Pemex tower, the largest "white elephant" in Mexico City) and a trade policy that reached surrealistic extremes, the key to the problem has been the extremely powerful Oil Workers' Union, whose leaders are "the true Sheikhs of Mexican oil." Its assets exceed $670 million, and a substantial part of Pemex's contracts were routinely awarded to companies owned by the union. De la Madrid at first tried to dismantle this and other mafias whose corruption and inefficiency are wrapped in a union flag. All in all, he failed, but he did achieve one breakthrough; the legal means to prevent new contracts between Pemex and the union.

For several years in a pivotal position to observe the relationship between Mexico and the United States, Riding is well aware of the "psychological gulf" which separates the two nations: Mexico's predominant stance is one of defensive resentment, although this is one more Mexican mask kept in place by politicians and intellectuals. The truth, he adds, is that "there is no consensus: no single image captures how Mexicans see the United States." The stance of the United States also is, surely, ambiguous, but perhaps may be summed up in one word: disdain. More than the economic and political differences, there exists a cultural estrangement, an inability to interpret each other without falling prey to ethnocentricity. Mexicans have a conspiratorial idea of what goes on in Washington and project their centralist concept of power on a system that, on the contrary, is decentralized. This explains, for example, why Mexican lobbies do not exist. On the other hand, the United States has—if any—a paranoid idea of what goes on in Mexico. Its greatest shortcoming with respect to

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Mexico, and the world in general, is sheer ignorance. Only through clear understanding of the history of the relations between the two countries can one understand Mexican attitudes, which may be defensive but are nonetheless real.

Mexican culture—what Riding refers to as "the mind of the people"—is somewhat shadowy and sketchy in this portrait. He refers to Mexicans as "oriental" beings: introspective, discreet, evasive, mistrusting, obsessed with questions of honor, obliged to work while desiring an easy life, warm, sentimental, gracious, full of "uncontrolled creativity," spontaneously musical, cruel—in a word, disorderly. Mexicans are said to be anarchic, "impossible to organize," incapable of outstanding team achievements. Anglo-Saxon efficiency, punctuality, and organization are quite alien to the individualistic, "tribal" Mexican. And it is this individualism that is supposed to explain the Mexican desire to avoid emotional contact, the Mexican caution in self-expression, wielding language as a mask, to obfuscate, not to make clear. The Mexican is pictured as tempering this loneliness by resorting to fiestas, or seeking refuge in the warm and secure bosom of his extended family.

Even allowing for the difficulties implicit in speaking of "a" Mexican psyche (each region of Mexico is different: the Spanish Creole north, for example, shows significant cultural differences from the *mestizo* center), Riding's journey through "oriental" Mexico lacks orientation. First, an obvious point: if the term "oriental" is to be used to evoke disorder, and an incapacity to adopt Western economic models, what are we to make of the Japanese or South Korean "economic miracles"? The seemingly anarchic disorder would appear to be a feature of urban development in any Third World country. Beyond its obvious drawbacks and social costs, this disorder has a more profound significance: a sense of natural liberty. This sense, while concomitant with sporadic violence and a disdain for law, explains why, for example, despite its immense power, the Mexican state has never even bordered on totalitarianism. Moreover, the Mexican expression of liberty is not chaotic: the individual in Mexico perceives himself as part of a religious, social, and family structure that both transcends and defines his personality. Anomie is an unthinkable illness in Mexico, and the suicide rate of the working classes is extremely low. But for the influence of these concepts of liberty and order, both of Hispanic origin, one would be hard put to explain the equanimity

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of the average Mexican in the face of the present crisis, or Mexico's internal stability, maintained without strong government coercion.

Nor can one sustain the idea that "individualism" is a fundamental trait of the "anarchic" Mexican. The reason that Mexican athletes excel in such individualistic sports as boxing and distance walking lies not in an inability to organize themselves in an Anglo-Saxon manner, but rather in an ancient stoicism which has both Hispanic and Aztec roots. Or, to take an example from the extended Mexican family, one can admit that charitable activities in Mexico are not organized: but charity is spontaneous when the need arises. Solidarity is an old component of Mexican morality. In small communities in Mexico, a roof and sustenance are usually available for the relative, friend or colleague fallen on hard times, whether or not that person belongs to the normal family circle. In 1938, for example, thousands of ordinary people lined up to contribute some of their belongings to help pay for the expropriation of the oil companies. On November 19, 1984, a huge gas explosion in Mexico City provoked an impressive number of donations of goods and money, despite the presumed impersonality of big city life. Ten months after, in the terrible earthquake that killed tens of thousands and left homeless even more, mutual help was common, regardless of social class. Everyone shared the rescue work. The "I" of the average Mexican is—sometimes—"we."

Riding mentions some of these strains of human strength and warmth in the Mexican character, but does not emphasize them, perhaps because they are at odds with his superficial reading of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, to take one example on which his description is based. In fact, the solitude Octavio Paz describes is a religious phenomenon; Riding's is social. For Paz, the fiesta is an occasion for purification, revolt, recreation, song, profanity, communion, and death.

Fundamentally, Riding's attempted analysis of Mexico's culture fails to distinguish between official Mexico and the people's Mexico. One instance is nationalism. The nationalism propounded by the government—in policy and doctrine—has become self-complacent far beyond historical justification. The "eternal victim" attitude has hindered Mexico's development, reduced competitiveness, and destroyed confidence in dealing with the outside world. But beyond the official culture, there is another culture which has little to do with nationalism or even anti-American feelings. It has to do with roots:

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esthetic, moral, religious. It is an identity embodying three centuries of Hispanic heritage, a culture that Riding promises to reveal but does not.

History affects daily life in Mexico, but while Riding recognizes this, he doesn't explore it. His treatment of the colonial period is more or less what any tourist could learn from the murals of Diego Rivera: the distorted and Manichean official version.

Distant Neighbors fails to mention that Mexico saw one of the most interesting experiments in cultural transference in Western history: the meeting of Spain and Meso-America. The tensions that arose when these radically different cultures met preoccupied contemporary theologians, interested Montaigne, and even today are the subject of passionate study. In the United States, Indians were exterminated or forcibly settled in reservations. In contrast (and without denying Spanish domination), Spain almost built a theology around the rights of the natives. The resulting moral restrictions, coupled with extensive intermarriage (*mestizaje*), moderated the impact of racism (even with respect to the black population), and brought about a sense of equality. In 1542, the Spanish Crown issued the Laws of the Indies, which protected the Indians' freedom, patrimony, and nonreligious cultural life. Those laws, implemented by the "trail" of churches, convents and schools which still winds through the Mexican countryside, formed part of a huge process of cultural transference, whose rubrics, however indirectly, for better or for worse, continue to give *order* to the Mexican mentality.

If there is one decisive fact which may explain public life in Mexico, it is the adaptation of the political architecture of Spain: the construction—different from the English social pact between individuals—of a political body, a hierarchical entity, in which the wishes of the prince and the people theoretically coincide, in obedience to natural law, and in the interests of *felicitas civitatis*. Thus, although painfully distant from the Italian Renaissance, the Protestant Reforms, political individualism, and the Industrial Revolution, Mexican colonial society progressed in a different way: by the development of moral and legal philosophy. It is easy to forget, for example, that New Spain abolished bondage long before the Anglo-Saxon colonies did, and that the indifference and cruelty towards blacks and natives which continued to be manifest in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century had long since disappeared in Spain's American colo-

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nies. This is not to deny that there was another side of the coin, from whose effects we still suffer: patronage, corruption, paternalism, inefficiency, lack of criticism, economic stagnation. What is important in all this is that one must not perceive the colonial period and its heritage as a simple problem of oppressors and oppressed, nor as a situation reminiscent of the totalitarian systems of our century. The paternalistic state of New Spain—like the Mexican state of the twentieth century—had an internal logic and a legitimacy very different from a despotic totalitarian state. The founding father of Mexican, and even Latin American statism was not Karl Marx, but a former theologian: Thomas Aquinas.

The many factual errors of the book pale when compared with its main shortcoming: the failure to understand the Iberian heritage which has shaped Mexico's language, culture, religion, civic and political life. Instead of being an "oriental" country, Mexico's historical place was once summed up by Octavio Paz: "We are a dissonant outpost of the West."

A good deal of the book is devoted to relating the sad failure of the Revolution to live up to its promises. And rightly so: the social bureaucracy which is the provider of health services, food, housing, education, security, justice, etcetera, to the population, functions, above all, for its own interests, and indeed merits the description Riding gives it: costly, inefficient, corrupt, overcentralized, and paternalistic.

Almost forty percent of the Mexican population live in the rural areas distributed among 95,000 communities. Riding dedicates a complete chapter to the theme: "Land si, liberty no." Again his interest is not so much rural life as the policies of the government toward the rural areas. Since the rise of Zapata, the Revolution proposed handing land over to the peasants and facilitating this with machinery, technical support, credit, and research. The failure of this project is perhaps the greatest tragedy of Mexico's contemporary history. The "ejido"—a small, quasi-communal piece of land allotted to peasants, over which they cannot exercise acts of dominion—has been a political solution that by itself brought "the seeds of economic disaster." But the greatest responsibility lies in the enormous subsidies that the rural areas have given to industry since the forties and, above all, in the bureaucratic pyramids that the peasants carry on their shoulders: 180 institutions, "monuments to populism."

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Riding handles skillfully his critical description of agrarian policy but fails in his comprehension of the life of the peasants. Self-employment and the "underground" or "informal" economy, for example, are vital although they do not appear in the national bookkeeping. They could be even more vital if the modern sector (public and private) were to study and support the subsistence economy by offering inexpensive and useful means that would enable the peasants to produce in their places of origin their own provisions (clothes, food, crops, housing) outside of the market and allow them to establish an advantageous exchange with the urban sector through, for example, in-bond plants spread throughout the rural areas. These transcultural ideas offered by the modern sector to the traditional sector have been developed by Gabriel Zaid in a fundamental book (*El Progreso Improductivo*) whose moral and economic premises are similar to those that in the sixteenth century were held by the Bishop of Michoacan, Vasco de Quiroga, reader of Thomas Moore and founder of one of the few successful utopias in history. After 450 years, the towns of the Tarascan plateau founded by Vasco de Quiroga are still specializing in the same crafts—furniture, blankets, bread, pottery, etcetera, that they exchange with neighboring towns without stopping the production of their own basic provisions.

Distant Neighbors was written without antipathy toward Mexico, but its reading leaves a bitter taste. In part, the problem originates with a significant omission: Riding attributes the survival of Mexico to the historical and cultural profundity of its society, to the "internal subtleties of an ancient, complex and unpredictable nation" which he fails to disclose. Thus, the superficiality, imprecision or lack of awareness in his treatment of those themes obscure the real elements that explain why the country continues moving ahead despite its crises.

The gloomy picture is completed in Riding's conclusions. He sees the power elite divided into two irreconcilable parties: the new breed of technocrats, more open and democratic, representative of a "Westernized, restless, individualistic, materialistic minority"; and the old school politicians who have known how to manage the "oriental, conformist, communitarian, traditional majority." In his judgement, the endeavors of the technocrats are misguided. Anything that contributes to a change in the status quo appears to him to be counterproductive. The United States, for example, should note that "Mexico's immediate stability is endangered less by a rebellion of the

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masses led by the Left than by a mutiny of the middle classes inspired by the Right [that would] disturb the political balance and risk stirring labor, peasant and student unrest." The verdict is clear: despite his book being a somber account of the consequences of the regime of a hegemonic party, Riding condemns Mexico, for life, to endure it:

> Mexico's entire stability has been built around the premise of a powerful, almost infallible central authority and, paradoxically, greater democracy could suggest disintegration of the country as well as the system . . . In its soul, Mexico is not—and perhaps never will be—a Western nation . . .

From there, according to Riding—and the Mexican government, in this sense, shares his ideas—the best alternative for Mexico is to stick to, more or less, the old system "with its mixture of authoritarianism and paternalism, of cynicism and idealism, of conciliation and negotiation."

A growing number of Mexicans, independently from their social or regional origin, think, point for point, to the contrary. The notable thing in Mexico is how the way is opened to the idea that democracy is now a premise of indispensible maturity for moving from stagnation to reanimation. Not all the problems that Riding notes could be solved by democracy, but in addition to being an end in itself, without democracy one does not see how to unleash processes as vital as federalism, decentralization, economic plurality, recuperation of confidence, a reduction in the size of the state, the limitation of union bossism, a halt to corruption, etcetera. Another factor: in the north of Mexico, but also in other parts of the country, there is a long-standing movement toward political modernity. Thus, the greater risk to the country's stability resides precisely in the effort to maintain the system's stability.

It will be said that Mexico's historical and cultural profile blocks the democratic option. The reality is different. Thomism is a benign root. Spain in our time and Latin America since its independence, despite long periods of tyranny, have vindicated democracy as the only legitimate system. One does not see why Mexico, with a democratic tradition of its own that originated with the liberals of the nineteenth century and survives until now, has to be the exception.

In his last paragraph Riding declares, "A system that is not Mexican cannot survive. What will survive is Mexico." It is impossi-

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ble to agree with the first observation: democracy, the universally valid system "extending to" Oriental countries such as Japan and India, seems today the clearest alternative to a "Mexican" but exhausted system. No one, on the other hand, objects to the second observation: Mexico will no doubt survive, but it is Mexico, justly, the subject that was lacking in Riding's distant portrait.

Coming in

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FICTION

Paul Breslow

ROMANCE OF THE BUYER

We were buying everywhere those days: what had begun in a roadside shed ended . . . in a city, in triumph, in renewal. Cities are made for buyers. They glow in the center of my vision; and their light is the sum of benign attracting marvels, the aura of all a buyer could obtain, the radiance of offerings (and the promise of attachments) falling upon the buyer's inner eye.

I celebrate the city, I said aloud. I celebrate its appliances and forms, beauties and cargoes, durables and elations. The meaning of buying will come clear in the city.

You buy the way you feel, Annette said, and you feel the way you buy. She wet the tip of a finger on her tongue and traced the curve of her eyebrows. Where's the whale gone? she asked. Why can't I see the whale?

We were standing on an outdoor deck, overlooking the whale pool, at the New York Aquarium. The first session of the Web of Buyers would begin in a few hours, in Manhattan, in the hotel we had left to escape, for a while, from the crowds. I had been assured that there were crowds, but I had failed to see them.

I don't despise the starting place, I said. They sold forage sorghum seed, bayberry tallow, Mason jars. I liked the place.

Annette moved a few steps away from me, holding on to the topmost piperail, as if for safety on a rolling ship.

It was only a shack, I said, set down upon the ground like a table, without subsurface foundations. There was a deeper earthiness, I recalled, in some of its merchandise: links in the food chain, digging tools with spare handles, substances for use in cesspools, vermin repellents. These were commodities rightly called *goods*, and I respected them, but I found it difficult to buy them. Many of them were essentially replacements, and I had never owned anything that they could replace. Worse yet, I began to believe that I was surrounded by emblems of other people's needs. I bought a dozen Mason jars; and later that day I began the campaign.

We can't see the whale, I said, because it's in its element.

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Annette moved back toward me. It can't breathe, she said, it can't breathe in its element. It has to come up and then go down.

I'm willing to buy it, I said, without seeing it.

You have the confidence, she said, but I'm a latecomer to buying. Of course, she continued, it would have been better if I'd been allowed to buy. We weren't poor, but, you know how it is among sellers, the girls especially suffer, the girls are suspected, no one says of what, and you worry, and then an old lady on a bus may tell you, as one told me, that you aren't supposed to buy.

She formed a circle with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, brought her hands together in front of her eyes to represent a pair of binoculars, and mimed further scrutiny of the pool.

Yes, she said, we should buy the whale. In fact, we should buy the whole place.

A loud male voice said: My dear, buying is not merely buying. The speaker was Flammarion, my theoretician, the ideologue of the Web of Buyers.

Is something wrong? I asked him. What exactly is wrong?

Much is right, he said. He patted the lapels of his double-breasted gray jacket (made to order in imitation of one worn by Bernard Berenson in an old photograph). The best of the buyers are gathering, he said, but even the best can be difficult.

I don't think I want to hear this, Annette said.

Nor do I, Flammarion said, but I must speak of it, although it now seems quite trivial, and one would use the word *merely* in speaking of it, if one could. One's loyalty is to buyers, certainly, even to buyers whose purchases were restricted to cardiac pacemakers, purchases to which no objection was made, until the surgeon to whom our buyers went, with their demand for immediate installation, claimed that the devices would be, as he put it, redundant.

He questioned the diagnosis of their cardiologists? I said.

He questioned the utility, Flammarion said, of each of them having more than one pacemaker. The problem, Flammarion continued, is that we haven't given enough attention to the buying of services. Our buyers didn't know how to handle the surgeon, they pressed their demand, saying, most unfortunately and inaccurately, that they belonged to a religion of buying. They picketed the surgeon, shaking tambourines and chanting; their chanting made matters worse, they knew no impressive chants, they merely called out the trade names of synthetic substances: Vylam and Oilon, Cycolac and Kompolite, and, I believe, Knight Guard with Tedlar.

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What's wrong with that? Annette asked.

It's staggering, I said.

But I've taken care of it, Flammarion said. I told the television people that we're not fetishists. One man refused to believe me; he insisted that we worship machines. I must admit, I said to him, that nothing sacred is human to me, and I offered him a postulate: *The machine is an externalized soul.* All of them, the interviewers and the technicians alike, fell silent; and then they applauded me. I was a success, one must say that, one had justified, there was a triumph, and it was mine, you see.

I corrected Flammarion, saying: *The externalized soul is a machine.*

His jowls quivered; he touched the knot of his necktie (Jermyn Street, London, Macmillan era); he said nothing. It's true, I said, that machines have their own indwelling peace. Flammarion's underchin became still, but my own words disturbed me. Machines, I don't know, they're not much. Their stillness is not truly peaceful. But what had made me think of such peace as a virtue? Do I want to buy peace? Nonsense, I want to move, to think, to cause; to be a presence of flesh and bones. Once you've seen *Lady from Shanghai*, you don't forget the sight of Orson Welles in an Aquarium.

We're not a religion, I said, and our city is not the Heavenly City. The names, I said, of the things that we buy, are no more suitable for chanting than are, oh, than are our own names. Annette, now standing on the bottom pipe of the rail, looked sharply at me and then away. We buy, I said, in testimony to the incorporeal, the possible, the felicitous, and the good.

I sensed disapproval. I've never denied, I said, that I often buy things that don't work. Possibly I buy them because they don't work. The disapproval (I thought) was my own; and I wondered at what job, if any, Annette worked.

Absolutely, Annette said, absolutely and right now, I must have a box of Cracker Jacks. She moved toward the indoor area of the Aquarium; her pace was uneven, as if she couldn't choose between walking and running.

We had to come here, Flammarion said. We're acknowledging sea life, he explained, and everyone understands an Aquarium. He looked bewildered. Yes, he said, an Aquarium is a useful thing, there is water, and there are beasts in the water, abhorrent or collectible or better not; and, while I have no faith in swimming symbols, an Aquarium is an image with a melody you can whistle; which is to say, that I wish that I'd invented the Aquarium; such an inven-

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tion would justify my life. He shot his cuffs. Oh this, he said, and handed me a yellow index card bearing the names of the few buyers who had come along to the Aquarium.

My depression just then may have had nothing to do with Flammarion. The air pollution was stifling; I had made no purchase for thirty-six hours; the whale wouldn't surface. Annette was an influence, to be sure. I thought of a sentence from Jonathan Edwards, a writer I often quote: *I have greatly longed of late, for a broken heart, and to lie low before God.*

That woman, Flammarion said, this Annette, is actually buying Cracker Jacks. Doesn't that show you? That shows you. She admitted, he said, she openly declared, the absolute necessity of the purchase. She *knows*, he cried, she *intends*, she *mocks*. Why, she's self-proclaimed, she's had practice, she looks around as if preparing an escape. She understands that between Cracker Jacks and the ideally real there is an endless distance, protracted by her satirical malice; and she must know that the very meaning of absolute necessity is called into question by the insignificance of those Jacks, those trivial Jacks.

Annette returned empty-handed.

Just rotten, Annette said. Awful things in there, pigs with gills and fins, bearded baby demons, an electric eel, and the sharks. There's a parrotfish, who wraps himself up in a sort of shroud and sleeps at the bottom of the sea. He's asleep now. It seems that sharks don't sleep. I forgot to buy the Cracker Jacks, those fish are all over, even the nicer fish are so interchangeable, though that's not their fault, they can't help being fish.

Flammarion briefly examined the heavens, cleared his throat, smacked his lips, and spoke to justify the lack of individuation among fishes: *Uniformity is the aggression of dumb things*, he said.

Cages for fish are cruel, Annette said. She wanted to buy all the fish in the Aquarium; because, she said, the idea of owning many examples of life pleased her; but she didn't want to become a slave-owner, she had in mind (and her idea was sound, for buying can be a release, of the bought as well as of the buyer) the liberation from their tanks of the fishes, and the release from their pools of the marine mammals, especially the whales. Above all the whales, she said, *because of their spouts*, and she ballooned out her cheeks like a trumpet player's and described with her hands the rotor and propeller of the obsolete flying machine called the autogyro, and she moved her hips slowly like an arthritic Hawaiian; and all this activity (so insistent

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was her inexact commotion) gave evidence for the spouting, like a geyser, of a whale.

In truth, in the reality soon breaking the water's surface, the whale's spout was feeble, a weak spray; lovable, but a spray. We saw the little flaps opening and closing; we saw primary time and self-warranting existence and underived rightness; we saw a spouting whale, whether or not its spout was abnormally slight. I imagined myself rising from my humdrum suffocating medium into a high ethereal breathing space; I decided to buy oxygen tanks, mountaineering equipment, a guidebook to Nepal; but then my life recaptured me, though curious music, unballasted and gliding, the music (I thought) of lost kites, not the music of any real life, came to my ears.

People should be sensitive, I said, they should enjoy looking at whales, and, if possible, they should buy them. But why? Flammarion asked. Think, I said. He showed furrows of thought upon his forehead, and he put his hands into the pockets of his trousers. Yes, he said, you can see for yourself that I've stopped caring. Creases are the most negligible of flaws, he said, and those people are buyers and they expect a speech. He nodded in the direction of a small group of people, some fifteen or twenty of them, most carrying shopping bags. I hadn't noticed them. Buyers, he said, *our people*; and he set up my portable amplifier and rostrum.

Annette stood leaning against the piperail, her back to the whale pool. Don't look at her, I told myself, don't give up. I stood on the two-stepped stool behind the rostrum and began.

The soul, I said, and the passions, and the mind; the possible, the actual, the neurological; the consecrated dreams, the drives, the calculations; the small gland in the brain Descartes said was the soul and many think it there now; the lemurline inheritances I myself love; the mind with its picture shows and doubts: those things are *things*, which we acquire or we create by our agents that are called cells; by those things and their efforts we earn our existence, we buy our very hopes.

We'll buy that, cried a few elderly voices.

We begin, I said, and we endure; we begin some time quite a bit after birth, and we die, rather arbitrarily it seems to me; nevertheless we begin and we endure seized of ourselves, full of the sense of owning our selves.

Of which I can give an example. Before I slept last night, the world seemed to spin around me, forming a blurry envelope; at first of uncertain shape and great size, then in the form of a small translu-

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cent sphere like a pingpong ball, save for an imperfection that I recognized, upon the deceleration of the ball's rotation, to be the inward protuberance of a dent. Or a nipple. Or nothing at all. I was tiny, a germ, solid and hard and tiny, within a flawed totality I understood in the darkness to be my rattle, my first synthetic possession, the contour of my existence as well as the special life of my being; that is to say, I lived within my possession; and the meaning of that life, discoverable by all in the deep structure of buying, has long been known to poets, mystics, gardeners, musicians, philosophers. Gabriel Marcel, for instance, observed that the possessive index is as certainly fixed when one says *I own a bicycle* as when one says *I have my views* or *I have free time*; and his dialectic of the inner and the outer shows the conjunction of externality and internality, between which the tension is a bond.

Buy that Marcel! my listeners called out.

Wittgenstein, I said, liked to play a lawn game in which individuals impersonating the sun, the earth and the moon would spin and revolve as their roles required. Korschak, whose avocations were smelting and forestry, taught that parental restriction of buying leads to vicious modes of goal-inhibited sublimation, though he never gave details. And Hazelbrooke, ah Hazelbrooke. Hazelbrooke said that the overblessed never need to acquire, and that they therefore succumb readily to ontic chill, which is a sort of debilitating inability to believe that you exist. All the necessary components of being, both organic and metaphysical, ice over.

Buy, came the chorus, *buy and buy.*

I allowed myself to look at Annette. She was shaking her head.

Buy yourself, a deep voice declared, *buy your life.*

Buying, I said, is the least limiting of secular acts. It's an expansion of the flowing present back toward a vital past of production, outward toward others, by gifts whether intangible or ornamental, forward by means of subsidies for remnants, monuments, prophecies, and ruins.

I continued to watch Annette. She smiled, then frowned, then looked away, then yawned, then scratched her neck, then yawned again. She was, I thought, going through the platitudes of gestures, briefly noting them by enacting them, tossing them away without considering that her litter would be studied for meaning.

For a buyer, I said, no price is too high. For a buyer, there is no price.

There is no price, the buyers affirmed.

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Buying, I said, defeats avarice without denying reality, and to understand that we must consider Ino Rosi's confutation, on the authority of Fenichel, of Lévi-Strauss's claim that Freud supported the view that conscious facts are either erroneous or illusory. For the sake of argument, let's grant Rosi this point. We must pretend that a view shown to be false by Lévi-Strauss was not said to be true at a much earlier date by Freud. I would, of course, prefer to discuss Sombart's analysis of the intersecting realms of feminine domination and rich confections, and I'm eager to analyze the Tiffany catalogue in the light of Malraux's theory of the Museum Without Walls. But Signor Rosi is determined to discuss the preconscious, which the structuralists correctly degrade to the status of an empty aggregation of lexical oddities, and it's obviously relevant that in today's session we buyers, whose views of buying reconcile structure and need, will ritually devenom our repressed nullities of mere acquisition. . . .

By the time I began to read from Jonathan Edwards, my electronic equipment faltered. I was loud enough later, however, when I quoted Paine. Because blood is loud, I thought.

Back at the hotel, Annette said: *It all means.*

She has a squeaky voice, some say, but they slander her; it's simply that she is a soprano who doesn't sing.

Today, I said, only *buying* means. It would mean so much more, I said to myself, if it revealed me to you, if you could see the wealth of my love. Buying, I said, is cheerful and loving.

I'm frequently unhappy, she said, but I don't know how often other people are unhappy.

Very often, I said, because they don't understand buying.

My condition, she said, is special. I want you to know. A midwife and not a physician attended my birth. My mother would stop up her nostrils with Kleenex when changing my diapers or bathing me; my father was a salad chef of some fame, whose specialty was a *muffled salad*; I won prizes in elementary school for my silence. When I was ten, my father stopped cleaning his glasses. My mother walked around in her nightgown all day, saying that hopeless misery is a form of serenity. I found my birth certificate, and it seemed strange to me because it had the words *Cause of Birth* printed on it, followed by a blank space no one had bothered to fill in.

We were standing in the lobby, my feet hurt, I was hungry, people were staring, I didn't have time to measure my words. Don't leave me, I said, please don't ever go away.

Good luck, Annette said; and then we were in a crowd; Annette

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wasn't there; Flammarion was next to me, talking of taste and style and measure, boasting of his borrowing power and his credit lines, complaining of the dust in his hotel room. He endorsed what he said was the view of Hegel, that the monuments of the Medici and of Ilaria del Caretto could not be called art; and he showed me old crumbling pages from a book about General Sherman, which he said he had bought for their scent. Don't be poignant, he advised, and don't pin down. He continued to talk while guiding me through the lobby, but his voice was drowned out by the crowd.

We reached a gray door, which was opened for us by a guard; we passed through to a flight of stairs. I am, Flammarion said as we went up, the canonical master of negative poise and refined neglect. I thought that he was probably preparing a difficult justification. I'm not a defector, he said, when we reached the landing. I feel checked, he said. We were standing in front of another gray door, upon which he knocked. Checked, he said again, because it seems to me that all form has been stolen and violated, allowed to live only behind the confines of a false name and degrading genealogy, wearing the rags and tatters of its material derivation. Cruel foster parents have come in the night and done this, he said. He knocked again, and we were admitted to an anteroom from which, a guard informed us, we could proceed directly to the stage of the hotel's auditorium. Five men and five women came walking toward me: pudgies and vests and denims and whiteshirts; dovebreasts and rednails and scatterlings; my escorts; my blindfish in the Web of Buyers; walking on linoleum, then on boards, on stage.

Thousands of buyers in the darkness presented their least glorious vital sounds: their wheezers, yelpers, dyspneacs, and rumblers; their oratorical mindwanderers. I heard the snaps of mechanical crickets, the cries of windup jackdaws, the blasts of pocket foghorns. Scattered in every crowd, I thought, are guiltless vandals compelled to announce their occupancy of a timespot as some are driven to write in sand; and before every crowd, there stands another, a hawkman dealing in persuasions, spreading his feathers wide or folding them tight, according to the strategies of his deception; and my cynicism was as cheap as sand, as easy to shape, but quick-setting, a compound I had bought and used, within seconds hardening and becoming a plinth upon which I could stand at mid-stage, trembling and sweating, calling to them as they wanted to be called.

Roar, I shouted; *buy*, I cried; *give and take.* I let them go and they went, chanting and screaming and stomping their feet; but their frenzy

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had arrived too easily, I thought, too many among them might be mail-order buyers, misbuyers with a greed for small things bearing names or initials (coasters, napkins, bookmarks), hopeless cases passing through toward disorders of personalization, soon to buy only indicators of ownership, adhesive stickers or brass nameplates, perhaps tools for the application (by etching or engraving or impressing) of their own names to objects they neither possessed nor imagined.

Be alchemists, I said, on private terms with all things: press skirts with steam irons and think of tropical intertwining life; let your watch with its movement of seventeen jewels become your heart with seventeen active forms of love; load a backpack with silver forks and land deeds and old letters and walk the streets with that weight in the role of leper, miser or fool; and, while saying this, I thought of Annette, wearing a sweater decorated with sea urchins, looking into a mirror.

Strike for the middle, I said, see. They found this to be funny. I drew the chart; I pushed a button that felt like flesh; that relatively rational form (my chart) was rendered anew, distorted, tortured into non-Euclidean carousing swirls, a mess.

They gasped at the sign of power: the new middle bramble: the end of simplicity: the pattern of our lives.

I showed them the new, vagarious middle course, the sum of flux and gleam. The natural imbalance. The earth seen aslant between faults. I showed them slides. I showed them noise they can see.

I was certain that this wonder, this visual noise, inclusive of filaments as consonantly ranked as harpstrings, of lonely cords each tense with its own drone, of brittle loops interskirling and snapping, of sirens naked in chaos—I was certain that this plain show of the fullest map would convey to these buyers the true figure of the intensive infinity of the world. Oh Lord.

They didn't really roar.

The projected bramble was intensely bright, but most of the auditorium remained in darkness. I could see some of the buyers in the light of the exit signs and the aisle markers, and I could, without seeing them, sense their outlived buys: rattan mats, steamer trunks with brass corners, jump ropes of frayed hemp, electric carving knives; sights that backslip the retina without engaging the mind.

You remember, I shouted, you remember; and I remembered when I would travel alone with my driver in a tiny limousine; my sweat and my pallor seemed then as incurable as my depression and

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my mortality; the intervals between moments of hope lengthened toward everlasting duration; the air in that bleak time was always foul, no sweet fragrances were on sale, I felt so old. I remembered buying a bedside clock that kept me awake by chiming the hours; a glue gun with which I had burned myself while pasting receipts together to form a scroll. I couldn't see Annette.

Without much hope, I signaled for the playing of tapes I had prepared a month before, after reading Whitehead's explanation of rhythm as a pattern showing novelty upon each exhibition; they were tapes of Ashanti musicians playing old drums in Kumasi, and they were played as I had mangled them (by excising bits here and there, and splicing the rest together, because both Whitehead and the Ashanti overvalue repetition); and they worked. *Roar*, I shouted, unnecessarily, for they were roaring, the rite was in motion, better than ever before (wilder); here, in the Web of Buyers, was the army of things at once ideas and actions; the lightening of death; proofs positive; an end to afternoons passed in watching sea gulls, those albatrosses formed small. I touched a switch on the speaker's panel, felt sparks, believed that I had generated them; looking upwards, I saw blue electric lines running from me to the ceiling and beyond. I am the thunder-buyer; a rightful owner; my own justification. I thought of flaking and cutting and the archaeology of implements; and I named myself the core tool remaining when the flakes have been struck away. Perhaps I could become a small but fundamental particle, a point used by a greater power in an abbreviation of energy. I was safe; but I was talking to myself; and he to whom I spoke was not in his customary place, behind my forehead, but before me, among the buyers.

You don't need a moose-horn coat rack, I told him, a man wearing a checked flannel shirt; you ought to buy a wooden clapper of the sort used in Mahler's Fifth, I advised him, who had suddenly put on pince-nez and a black jacket; the object of buying, I said, is the creation of a buyer, and my listener was a teenager with a fuzzy beard.

The buyers were coming forward now, using microphones in the aisles, a dozen speaking at once, all drowned out by the drums; this chaos fascinated me, I wanted it to continue, I saw no way to end it, but then the tape ran out, and one of the buyers sharpened in particularity, gained in volume, spoke of himself (at least to me) before his words could be heard. He was a buyer who started in late pre-maturity, acquiring a succession of ultrasonic cleaning machines,

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small ones for pearls and industrial models for rusty gears, secretly discarding each in turn. He offended me; he wore a suede jacket and never carried anything; he could have been one of the lifestyle mob. My knowledge of him at that moment was perhaps no more than supposition or a memory trace; but I knew that as a child he had collected inexhaustible things (items of a given color, any items whatever, and things he made eligible for collection by placing them under his bed); and I knew that when he had finished with the magic of ultrasonic purification he had gone on to acquire a kayak; an antacid franchise; a fruitfly arbor.

I'm Schroeder, he was saying when his words became audible, and he said it many times. I want stuff, he said, lots of it, mounds of stuff; I want sides of beef from prize cattle, I'll freeze them in lockers, I want a leather pig from England, a sauna from Denmark, a big hunk of lava from Vesuvius, a chow dog from Macao, a red Packard, and all the benefits of civilization as we know it today. I already had a fruitfly arbor, but I lost it and I want it back. I'm Schroeder. I want a stuffed wombat. I want to corner the market in James Dean memorabilia. I want the impedimenta of the biggest samurai. I want permission. I want a gold Christmas tree and I want, oh no no. He struck his chest weakly, in what looked to me like the threat display of a sedentary gorilla.

The buyers exploded with faith and belief; they procured votive candles and held them aloft; they applauded and hissed. They entered into unconcealment, caressed their friends, told strangers of their debts. They sang without words, danced their attendance at this wondrous assembly, ran out to buy pennants and streamers and helium-filled stellated dodecahedrons, and returned to give those things away. Legs were uncrossed, checkbooks waved, catalogues shredded and strewn.

Standing in the auditorium, near the stage to my right, a tall woman in a roundnecked, purple sweater with padded shoulders, her hair fixed in Mannerist curls, began to giggle, and then she laughed, and her hair, black and wet, unwound itself and fell free. This radically laughing Annette was a version of herself I hadn't seen before.

She laughed often during lunch in my suite; and she ate a large roasted chicken and a jar of Three Bean Salad presented to us by Room Service with its label still attached. I have a few gold bars, I said. She laughed. And I have, I continued, a Sheraton cheveret, a small Burne-Jones of Zephyr and Psyche, a mammilary stalactite

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from Chihuahua, and a song sheet for *The Girl in Chintz* showing on its first page a picture of George Clare, the Victorian female impersonator, in a blue flowered walking dress. She laughed; but she seemed far away.

I bought myself, she said. Don't stop me, she continued, I don't want you to stop me. My skin was no good. Or I thought it was no good. I'll never know the truth. I hated my skin, so I had it removed. A grinder revolves like a dentist's drill; it's made out of diamonds; 48,000 revolutions per minute; against skin. A crust formed and when it fell off I thought it had worked; but people on the street pointed to me. My mother said my face was wrinkled although I wasn't even thirty because of sins that the people on the street saw, and that was why they reported me to the detectives in hats who bothered her. So I tried again. I had the skin on my face burned off. They used carbolic acid. Then they applied adhesive tape; they masked me with tape and they pulled it off, along with more skin.

Is that true?

No, she said. She adjusted her garter belt and whispered *kill*, just as Flammarion came through the door.

Have you justified? I demanded.

What? he asked. Heidegger, he began automatically, is supposed to have said that life is a business whether or not it covers its costs; and Freud wrote: I do not myself know what animals dream of. Flammarion looked around the room, wildly I thought and desperately. Although, he said, I have achieved little distinction in your Web, and may be accounted no more than an amateur in justification, I know mistakes when I think about them, because my stomach churns, after a fashion, and that Bacchic hysteria was a mistake; and your babytalk of love and seventeen hearts was worse; and your ill-usage of poor Mr. Schroeder was a complete disaster, for he, whatever his taste, at least makes choices and understands that consciousness has always an object, which in the case of this Web, means *an inanimate object.*

I did nothing to him, I said. There were spontaneous rites of integration from which he may have been excluded. And I think he said he wanted a chow dog, presumably alive.

I've studied spontaneity, Flammarion shouted. He pointed an accusing finger at Annette, who held out her hand to him, at first as if in friendship, then as if she expected it to be kissed. Flammarion moved to the door, flung it open, and presented Schroeder, in a wheelchair, attended by a hotel porter, to whom Flammarion gave a beckoning wave and a tip. Tell them, Flammarion said to Schroeder.

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I don't know why I bought, the invalid said, but I experienced my ignorance of my motives as a mystery appropriately hidden. I have a pain, he said, making a fist over his heart, but I can't feel it. I'm important, he said, moving his fist to and fro, I'm big in here.

I took Annette's hand.

The driver of the cab in which we rode to my apartment asked for my autograph (I signed myself First Buyer); the doorman took off his fez respectfully, to Annette; the elevator operator brushed our shoulders with an artist's paintbrush.

That's my coffee table, I said, I wanted you to sit on it. It's teak, designed by Hans Wegner; I have three of them; one of them is in a museum, on loan, another is in storage, this one is stroked daily with rags soaked in a white cream of entirely vegetable origin, wholly free of whale oil; and I know that Scandinavian modern furniture isn't chic, I collect the recently outmoded. I'm sorry, I said.

For sounding like Flammarion, she said. We sat at opposite ends of my couch. My head was turned toward her, my body not so; and she sat in much the same way, though she squinted and her eyes converged slightly. Like a Siamese cat's, she said; and stopped squinting and was no longer cross-eyed. It doesn't matter, I said. That you want to buy me, she said. It's been too full a day, I complained. What keeps it from overflowing? she asked, the surface tension? I couldn't answer.

I'm an intensifier, she said. My life is perhaps a dream formation; my world is my body; I like illusion sleeves, closed-circuit sounds like those of tennis, and bioluminescence by which I mean chiefly fireflies.

Gusdorf, I said, tells us, in *La Parole*, that we must sometimes choose between inauthenticity and incomprehensibility.

Annette slipped off her shoes and stood on the couch. What do you like best about me? she asked. For that matter, do you like me at all? Could it be that I'm no more than the after-image of another? Or is it my chin? Do you like my chin?

Now, I said, that you've called my attention to it, I see that it's fine.

Tell me, she said, what you would do for me. Would you snivel for me and cry? What about songs and jousting? And I don't know you well. Do your passions require special postures of expectation or dread?

I remembered a passage from that work I know so well, the *Personal Narrative* of Jonathan Edwards: *I have had a vastly greater sense of my own wickedness, and the badness of my heart, than ever I had before my con-*

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version. Such a statement can disconnect me. But it didn't; though safety comes as a shock to the rescued.

For a second, Annette said, there was a light in your eyes. Were you thinking of me? I've never seen a light in anyone's eyes, not for me.

It was an optical illusion, I said. Eyes don't give light, they take it.

But you were thinking of me?

Of both of us, I said.

She descended from the couch and sat on the floor.

Buying, I said, is the perfection of a desire.

She rose and walked softly, in her unshod feet, around the coffee table. I'm not leaving, she said.

You don't understand, I said.

I understand, she replied, far more than I can possibly believe.

No, she said an hour later, I don't understand what can be bought or sold or why.

We live in a confusing matrix, I said. There are slow bottom currents in the seas of the earth, very slow great currents, that cause tidal friction, which is a process that transfers rotational energy from the earth to the moon and slows down the earth.

What's that? she said. What is it that you're claiming is cosmic?

What's this? I asked. These, I amended.

They're called Montgomery's tubercles, she said. *Glandulae areolares*. Friendly little dots.

I like them too.

It's interesting, she said, that such things can be faked. In reconstructions they dice cartilage from the ear and put bits just below the surface of the skin in the right places.

They *dice cartilage*? How do you know? *Why* do you know?

Oh really. What would you prefer to know?

I looked around the room. We could turn on the television, she said, and watch you. That would be a big thrill.

I turned the set on, and there I was, on tape, struggling with slogans and Latin, saying that selling is death, the final clearance, exhaustion of resources; buying is life, expansion, affirmation; buying is a proof of existence, so clear a proof that we must henceforth say, instead of *Cogito ergo sum*, with equal or surpassing truth, *Mercoro ergo sum*, I buy therefore I am.

I fell asleep, and wandered among mute ensembles of drills,

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hasps, ladders, safety pins, and scrimshaw tools. Then I heard the telephone ring and Annette's voice. Philadelphia, she was saying, he didn't tell me about Philadelphia, he told me about the earth and the moon. She hung up.

No doubt, she said, they need you; and, no doubt, you'll go.

But love, I began to explain.

Can be bought and bought again, she said.

I've never really bought love, I said. It can't be done well.

She looked through me, to the white wall, and I learned how much more fearful it can be to imagine oneself never born than to contemplate death.

The problem in Philadelphia, I said, is that charlatans have proclaimed false paradoxes, restrictive of buying. They've created an image of multiple fogs within department stores; they're wild linear fanatics; they revile the rounded and the jagged; and they propose a referendum to enact a law of excluded muddle.

I'm going with you, she said. Physically, she added.

On the way to the airport, Annette caught sight of a seller, a tall man with a neatly trimmed beard, who was wearing a suit resembling Flammarion's, a good gray suit of an outmoded style. The seller's suit, however, was patched at the elbows; and the seller wore a black bowler hat, of the type worn by London stockbrokers and Peruvian Indians. We stopped to inspect his offerings, which were set out on an orange crate.

I have, said the seller, the proper licenses and the best selection and an old, established business. I have, he said, a good name. The momentary men think that names grow on trees, but we know better. The momentary men succumb to setbacks like the ducks in shooting galleries: they just fall over. He stared at Annette with considerable interest. Do they, he asked, still have shooting galleries?

Yes, Annette said, but I don't know about the ducks.

Your wares, I said. Show them, please.

He pointed to several bags made of cloudy plastic. Their contents could not be seen. At stage right, he said, we have comestibles and sewing materials, including thread. In the center, I have given pride of place, as it were, to the office supplies. Each bag contains, in addition to assortments of clips and erasers, a rubber stamp with the word RECEIVED. There is no charge for the stamp. The luxuries rest at ease in their bags at the left, the range of my offerings in this field being as broad as can be expected to obtain among five items. I

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can supply a rhodium bracelet for a man, with huge masculine links resembling those in the chains with which boxer dogs are leashed.

The food, Annette said, might be more practical.

I have rice, the seller said. Good, strong rice. Each grain is perfect and can stand alone, there aren't any adhesions, this is approved rice. You can be sure that this rice won't cause any embarrassment if you throw it about after a wedding. Or if it's thrown at you.

Annette blushed; and she paid five dollars for a bag of rice. Congratulations, the seller said, you have just shown that you know rice. He looked over his shoulder, then quickly pushed up the sleeve of his jacket, revealing a bandage around his forearm, into which he thrust Annette's money. There are mobs of buyers in the streets, he said, and we aren't safe. But you can find me again, if you want, just ask for me anywhere. I'm known as the thunder-seller.

In my Philadelphia house, Annette and I sat at opposite ends of the living room, in bentwood rocking chairs. Neither of us rocked. The room itself was prejudiced against movement: the windows would not open; the carpet was crudely tacked to the floor at its edges; no portable objects were within view.

I want to leave my mark, I said. That's not vandalism. Goethe was a high-minded man, there has been none minded higher, and yet, I've read, he once wrote something on the frame of a window overlooking a mountain.

What did he write? Annette asked.

I don't remember, I said. I suppose he annotated the beauty of the view.

You don't know what you want, Annette said, but you have it.

Tell me no riddles, I said. Give me no gifts, I thought.

I'll try to cook the rice, she said.

Once she had gone to the kitchen, I felt more at home. A sense of purpose, I reflected, is achieved by making a mark. You have to be alone to do that. On the other hand, as Connie Mack said: I guess more players lick themselves than are ever licked by an opposing team. No that wasn't it, not at all, that was something from a pamphlet called *Horse Sense.* There was probably a copy in the basement. I told myself that a sense of purpose can't exist without the quality of motion; purpose, whatever it may be, carries one weightless as a spore through the experience of becoming purposeful. Nothing grows without motion except oldness.

Annette returned to the room, the bag of rice in one hand, a printed card in the other. There were bugs in the rice, she said, and

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this advertisement. It says the bugs are Long-Headed Flour Beetles, *Latheticus Oryzae*, a form of granary weevil, and that you can order more of them, from a Post Office Box.

Selling is death, I said.

But it's just silly, she said. According to the card, the beetles are a good source of protein. The card is an annotation of the bugs.

Do you want me to lose? I shouted. Do you want the desolation of exhibited failure?

I don't know why it has to be hidden, she said softly. I suppose it may have something to do with the tides.

You are, I said, in a state of error. You are totally wrong. A seller is a danger, a potential murderer, a disguised man with a gun, like a sniper. The sniper, or the seller, whatever the case may be, carries within him the forces that build up, in tiny undetected increments, a calcific node from which there spring, like leaves, hard and bony plates, flat and thin plaques, his armor; and that shields him, certainly, but it also shadows him; and within that darkness, that safe darkness, the sniper cannot find his own placemarks; he is condemned forever, to look out, beyond the shadows, to his victims.

Have you abnormalled? she asked.

I stood up. It's cold here, I said, tundra cold. I took a few steps forward. It's hot over here, I said, if I wanted to be hot I would buy a safari to Botswana. I moved crabwise to the side. Here, I complained, *it's cold again. This room, I said, is a cube of stasis; I own* this room and yet it's hostile, it doesn't fit me, it's too loose and it smells like wet gabardine.

Perhaps upstairs, Annette said.

Up there? Don't be silly, I said, it's like a murdered breeding-pen up there.

How can I possibly calm you? Annette asked.

By living a perfect childhood in this house, I said, for an hour or so, in about 1880, on a late winter afternoon.

She succeeded.

She found, in the attic, an oil lamp with a shade of dragonfly glass, and set it on the dining table. After announcing buttered scones, she served me toasted slices of Wonder Bread, arranged on the upturned lid of an Italian cookie tin. She described the snow crystals on the window panes, the steaming breath of blanketed horses, the young men tramping in high-buttoned shoes, their skates slung over their shoulders, on their way to a solidly frozen river.

Rising late the next day, we went at noon to the zoo, which was

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strangely underpopulated. The air was thick, and the ponds were black and muddy; but the grass remained green, and the unblighted trees, though bare, looked sturdy. A guard turned away from us with an adversary sullenness.

This, said Annette, is the kindest zoo I've ever seen.

The guard, off in the distance now, stood before a row of hedges whose purpose, I knew, was to nourish thorns, to sustain toxins, to hide beauty.

I love you, Annette said, and I am deeply grateful to you for taking me to this kind and empty zoo. She seized my arm. Can't you hear me? she said.

A sequence of expressions appeared on Annette's face. They were not platitudes; and they weren't what people call fleeting expressions. They were presented slowly, and each expression left a slight trace and seemed to represent an emotion or a thought that would permanently remain. But the meaning of her expressions escaped me; unless the meaning was that of ambiguity itself. I decided to forget the expressions while remembering her face, a taut frame.

Answer me, Annette cried. I am offering you my body, which is greater than zero point four percent heart; I am offering you my mind, which is two point three percent of my total weight; and I am offering you my soul, which is weightless. All of me will belong to you, won't you buy? Why won't you buy?

I stood before the vacant, locked cages of fashionable predators, cheetahs and lynxes, in deadly fear of Annette's gambling surge toward the impossible, my heart skipping in recessional beats, my mind full of a sense, of no acquitting force, that by rejecting Annette I might release my fear convulsively, as an explosion showing desire destroyed by ambition, as a declaration, long overdue, of my loveless faith in rubble.

Take my love, Annette said.

Take this love, I thought, and never buy again, take this love.

Go away Annette, I said, please go away. She went quickly away. I had never owned anything that I could replace. There is no price.

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Pearl K. Bell

FICTION CHRONICLE

The paradox of present-day American fiction is not easily explained. Why is it that in a society as diverse and complex as ours, so many novelists and storytellers inhabit a world no bigger than their skulls? Whatever else their work may reveal, for these writers the sense of society has become exhausted. The life they are concerned with is a private affair, and the reverberations of the public, communal sphere are neither heard nor noticed.

Such writers—Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Mary Robison, Renata Adler—have been called postmodernists, though exactly what they are rejecting in the modern tradition is by no means clear. They are also called minimalists, a label that is more accurate and yet unsettling. In their different ways, these writers are astonishingly incurious about any experience, person, place, or time beyond their tightly absorbed selves. They are not interested in the uses of memory, which is the specificity of history. Their stories—brief snatches of unadorned randomness devoid of motives, causes, consequences—take place in a timeless present, and are, indeed, usually told in the present tense. As the writer constructs his collages of indirection, full of offhand gestures, disjointed perceptions, fragments of banal talk unsullied by expressive feeling or judgement, he (or she) seems to maintain a detached neutrality toward these bits and pieces of experience. The moral, social, and historical implications that would be explored by traditional novelists have no place in minimalist fiction. Immediacy is everything, and ideas rooted in a sense of the past are heresy.

If this be *post*modernism, it is also curiously dated. Immediacy was a crucial imperative of modernist art and literature. For Gertrude Stein, it was the "business of art," as she put it, to live in "the complete actual present." Since nothing could be allowed to intervene between image and response, even the innocent interruptions of the comma were thrown out. Between the sensations and impressions bombarding the writer, and their instantaneous effect on the reader, there was no room or reason for reflective distance and distracting associations. Nor is the minimalist attempt to appear totally impersonal all that new. The French writers of the *nouveau roman*, such as Michel Butor and Nathalie Sarraute, preferred disembodied voices

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to identifiable human characters, and concentrated on the physical detail of surfaces from which depth of character, narrative progression, social background, and interpretive commentary had been ruthlessly excised. But they were at least adventurous in their manipulation of form and language.

The American minimalists also narrow their sights to the surface of existence, but they are not interested in the intricacies of literary experiment. In the stories of Ann Beattie and Raymond Carver, actuality is not distorted or rearranged, it is reduced to the limits of their eyes and ears. But they do not succeed in removing themselves from their fiction, as the French novelists sought to do. In the novels of Renata Adler, the only voice we hear is that of the writing self hopping from one discontinuous moment to another, yet these fragments of this and that are presented as though they had floated loose of any human or social attachment. Though the so-called postmodernists refuse to judge or comment on the snapshot bits and pieces of observed experience we are given, their work is drenched in an odd kind of narcissism that tries hard to appear perfectly objective—about themselves.

In *our* immediate present, the influence exerted by Beattie, Carver et al. on the younger generation of writers has been enormous. In the story collections recently published by two new writers, the modish dedication to the haphazard and the unexplained takes dissimilar forms, but the sources of their view of fiction are unmistakable. Tama Janowitz shares Ann Beattie's obsession with meaningless eccentricity and feckless losers, though she carries it to a vulgar extreme all her own. Deborah Eisenberg, a far more gifted writer, is closer to the art of Raymond Carver, whose characters at least have *some* stake in a recognizable reality even though we are told so little about them.

On the dust jacket of Tama Janowitz's *The Slaves of New York*, she spells out her aesthetic credo, if you can call it that: "So it's like this: for some time I've been hanging around a lot of different places. . . . The things I've seen, while I was there, I kept my mouth shut. But later, when I got home, I wrote down what I saw . . . what people wore, what they said to each other. . . . All this time I was like an invisible fly upon the wall." What the fly saw can be bizarre or pathetic or merely silly, but it all amounts to the same perception for Janowitz. A denizen of Soho and the East Village art world, she is a

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connoisseur of junk, and her stories are loaded with junk art, junk people, junk food, junk prose.

A sorry creature named Eleanor shuffles through some of the stories. She is a peanut-brained jewelry designer ("I worked in rubber, shellacked sea horses, plastic James Bond-doll earrings.") who lives with Stash, a painter whose huge canvases depict Bullwinkle the Moose and Quick Draw McGraw. Stash is awful to Eleanor, but she can't move out because it's so hard to find a place to live in New York. Before long we realize that the apartment shortage is the single thread of rational continuity we can hope to find in Janowitz's stories. "I might never have found my vocation if I hadn't been evicted from my apartment," we are told by a well-born Jewish (!) prostitute; another character goes to court to protest her eviction notice. The slaves of New York, in short, are slaves of real estate.

In addition to the housing shortage, Janowitz also rattles merrily along about a half-crazed Soho art dealer, weirdos in various shapes and sizes, a "serious" artist whose "main lust in life . . . was to construct the chapel of Jesus Christ as a Woman, adjacent to the Vatican." But no matter what they say or do, it all sounds exactly the same. This ill-written hodgepodge has been hailed in some quarters as a wacky and hilarious report on the New York art scene in the eighties, but none of it's funny. For Janowitz everything she writes about has equally affectless and pointless weight, while her sentences skitter along like street litter tossed in a high wind. It's hard to figure out what *The New Yorker* found interesting about the four stories they published, beyond the Soho effluvia Janowitz exudes from every pore.

The stories Deborah Eisenberg has brought together in *Transactions in a Foreign Currency* have a distinct, often very funny, ring of truth about the way some of us live now. She is drawn to the kind of odd-lot New York woman who lives on takeout and chaos, such as the flaky owner of a tacky dress shop in the East Village who gets high on the sound of her rackety talk, and couldn't stick to the point if her life depended on it. She begins telling a friend about the trouble she's in with two jealous boyfriends, and is immediately adrift on a sea of irrelevance:

> "If you'd come half an hour later, you probably would have found me in a pool of blood with a machete between my ribs." She looked at me blankly for a moment. "Between my ribs? Is

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> that what people say? It sounds wrong. 'Between my ribs,' 'among my ribs'—doesn't 'between my ribs' make it sound like you've only got two ribs? It's like people say 'between my teeth'—and it sounds like you've only got two teeth. Well no, that doesn't work either, does it, because you can really only get something caught —oh, weird—between two teeth!"
>
> "Cinder," I said. "What happened?"
>
> "What?" she said. "Oh."

Eisenberg's very sharp ear captures this familiar Villagey type—fatally disorganized and relentlessly distractable—with brilliant accuracy. Too restless and disheveled to concentrate on a thought, a sentence, a business, or a lover, these young women are constantly beset by the unexpected, which is usually disastrous.

Coolly observant, Eisenberg writes with unwavering self-possession about the disconnected urban types who don't know where they're going or where, as they might say, they're coming from, but they can't sit still. Like Ann Beattie, she is intrigued by the aimless and rootless women and men who in rosier days might have been part of the counterculture, but are now attached to nothing and no one, their lives as rudderless as a mote of dust. The faceless young woman in the title story is telephoned out of the blue by a man who for years has treated her like a pair of pants forgotten at the cleaner's. Off she flies to Montreal without a backward glance at the life she can abandon at a moment's notice. Alone in a strange city over Christmas—the old flame is that kind of bastard—she floats through the empty days in stupefied apathy, and goes to bed with a menacing stranger for lack of anything else to do.

There is a lot of pointless wandering from nowhere to nowhere in Eisenberg's stories, and after a while we become impatient with these drifting souls propelled by undisclosed forces they make no effort to define or change. We long to know how they came to be mired in a swamp of the meaningless and the adventitious, but in minimalist stories these questions are never answered. Though Eisenberg, to her credit, does not sound as icily unmoved as Ann Beattie about the orphans of contingency that float through their stories, her feelings remain opaque. Despite the striking wit and polish of her fiction, our craving for some personal history placed within a larger frame of reference is never satisfied, and it leaves few marks in the mind.

The lean, unassertive prose of Susan Minot, and the fragmen-

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tary structure of her novel, *Monkeys*, have led a number of reviewers to lump her with the minimalists. Yet her short and powerful book reveals a view of life and the transformations of fiction very different from their fashionably anomic stare. Minot's scrupulously unindulgent account of a lively, troubled Catholic family is composed of brief but evocatively detailed pictures of change over the span of thirteen years. The alcoholic *père de famille* is a tarnished Boston Brahmin who married down; the Irish Catholic mother of the seven children is not earthy but quicksilver, sharp-tongued and sharp-elbowed, subtly protective of her sodden eccentric husband, forever stamping out the brush-fires that break out among so many clamorous, demanding children.

Unlike the novels and stories fixated on the eternally present moment, *Monkeys* packs a world of change into its brief series of sketches, yet it is written with such understated delicacy that it can at first seem too slight and fragile, a cobweb about to succumb to a broom. But Minot holds the web together with a remarkably steady and discriminating hand as she sorts out and vividly evokes the noisy, cluttered dailiness of a many-childrened family with such precision that every detail registers with a depth and purity of feeling rarely encountered these days.

She knows exactly how large families can sometimes work and sometimes seem to be falling apart. The unalterable fact that children do grow up, that change must be reckoned with, protects Minot from the modish temptations of passivity, and when tragedy assaults the family—the mother's car is struck by a train—she registers the brutal shock waves of loss with a startling shift of tone. The soft laconic voice is freed for a moment from its cage of understatement—not, as Minot wisely understands, at the moment the family learns of Mum's death, but later, when the children furiously act out their helpless inconsolability.

> Then it wasn't the same any more as when their mother had died. It wasn't as if you had seen the Devil only in a flash. It wasn't as if he had appeared for an instant and then was gone again. Now the feeling was this: that the Devil had swooped down and had landed and was lingering with them all, hulking in the middle of the kitchen table, settling down to stay.

Far from being a conventional novelist, Minot knows how to use the new-style gestures and devices—fragmentary episodes, elliptical si-

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lence, abrupt changes of scene and mood—but she never permits them to stifle emotion or blur the moral clarity of her vision.

Since memory is obviously the source of the reality she commands, Minot is aware of the debt that the present owes to the past, which also casts its shadow on the precarious accommodations of the future. This is how she sees the family after they have flung the mother's ashes into the sea: "Up the ramp they went, in single file, feeling something lofty in their procession, hearing flags billow and snap, following at one another's heels, no one with the slightest idea, when they raised their heads and looked around, of where to go." In prose as unyielding and clean and bare as a weathered bone, Susan Minot comes right to the heart of grief for those who must go on living.

Despite all the critical attention lavished these days on the apostles of the present tense, traditional novelists have not yet retreated completely into resentful silence. Anti-intellectualism may be rampant among the postmodernists, but there are still hard-working and serious novelists around who believe in the literary vitality that can be derived from the interplay of ideas, the exploration of manners and morals, the role of politics and social dilemmas in everyday life.

It is nonetheless true, as *The Economist* (that cool eye of reality) observed last autumn, that "American fiction needs a genius or two." The big guns of the postwar American novel—Bellow, Malamud, Mailer, Roth—are either gone; or publish relatively little (only one novel from Bellow since he won the Nobel Prize in 1976); or wind up for a greatness they don't deliver, like Mailer; or chew the same autobiographical cud over and over, like Philip Roth. (Perhaps Roth is about to surprise us, but his new novel, *The Counterlife*, which may at last be about something other than the wages of sinful success, was still under wraps when this review was written.)

In the younger generation, no one has matched the industry and fluent inventiveness of John Updike, nor come so close to realizing the utopian ambition of appealing to a general audience without having to compromise. That he is as erudite as he is prolific, blessed with unflagging intellectual energy, is demonstrated week after week in his *New Yorker* reviews. Unfortunately his new novel, *Roger's Version*, which at first promises to mine a fresh lode of discovery and exaltation, is an acrobatic stunt on one level, and a wearying reprise, on another, of the predictable Updike fixations with God

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and sex, plus a new source of pyrotechnical dazzle, computer science, with a large helping of physics thrown in for good measure.

There is, of course, a story, and it begins when Roger Lambert, a defrocked Protestant minister who is now a professor of theology (his specialties are heresy and blasphemy) at an unnamed Divinity School, obviously Harvard, is approached by Dale Kohler, a scruffy research assistant in the university's computer lab. Dale believes he can prove the existence of God scientifically with a computer, and he wants Roger to help him get a grant. A fleet-footed pro at theological disputation, Roger tries to dissuade the God-intoxicated hacker from his "aesthetically and ethically repulsive" project with a barrage of arguments ranging across an immense arc of history and exegesis from the Hebrew prophets, Tertullian and the Gnostics to Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. Roger draws upon a heavy load of Latin (which Updike, unlike Umberto Eco, obligingly translates for the ignorant), and Dale dumps an even heavier one of computer lore that is unintelligible (and untranslatable) to the layman. But the younger man persists in his madness, obstinately certain that the right number-crunching will reveal the face of God on his screen as though it were a Shroud of Turin in pixels.

There is a more salacious reason for Dale's presence in the story. He is a friend of Roger's niece Verna, a nineteen-year-old slut living with her illegitimate black baby in a squalid housing project not far from the university. Roger is a theologian but no angel, cheerfully admitting he derives the same "comfort and inspiration" from pornography that he does from religious texts. While he slides into Verna's bed, his restless wife finds relief from her chronic ennui in organ-grinding sex with Dale. Sex is rarely left to the imagination in Updike's novels, but it is heavy-handed anatomical dullness in *Roger's Version.*

Indeed, the entire novel, despite the metaphoric opulence that is the hallmark of Updike's virtuosity, has a leaden, laborious air. We become altogether too conscious of the exorbitant effort the novelist had to make in mastering the scientific arcana. As the common reader, dazed and unscientific, stumbles through the dense technological underbrush of bytes and algorithms and the Planck constant and Mandelbrot's fractiles, and fails to make any sense of "a Higgs field tunnelling in a quantum fluctuation through the energy barrier in a false-vacuum state," we want to remind Updike that his word-processor is off the gauge. There is too much learning and not enough wisdom. Perhaps only a writer with the assets of Thomas Pynchon—

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he was trained as a physicist, and has a surreal comic imagination —can breathe fictional life into technology, transfiguring scientific know-how into the elaborate farce of *Gravity's Rainbow*. But in the domestic realism of John Updike the juggling of science and fiction doesn't work.

If we need any proof that less is more in a novel's descriptions of sex, it comes from an unexpected source: Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*, published twenty-five years after the author's death. Powerfully suggestive without being relentlessly explicit, this story of a doomed marriage is charged with sexual urgency. The "devil things" that the young husband and wife indulge in are not spelled out, yet this is the most nakedly erotic book Hemingway wrote.

He apparently began *The Garden of Eden* around 1946 and worked at it sporadically until his death in 1961. For some reason he was unable to pare down the huge, unwieldy manuscript, couldn't find the concrete shape of his original vision, and the book remained unfinished at the end. Recently an editor at Scribner's took on the formidable pruning that Hemingway could neither confront nor carry out, and the result, while certainly not seamless and painfully rough in some places, has some luminous surprises.

The prose, much of the way through, has a lyrical tenderness very different from the taut, compressed exactitude of the famous Hemingway style. Though by now it is hardly news that the "truth-telling" severity of this style hid a romantic heart, there is an uncharacteristically open, loose, relaxed sweetness in the prose of this "found" novel as Hemingway recounts the youthful pleasure that David and Catherine Bourne, newly married, take in each other before things begin to go wrong.

> The fishing boats were well out. They had gone out in the dark with the first rising of the breeze and the young man and the girl had wakened and heard them and then curled together under the sheet of the bed and slept again. They had made love when they were half awake with the bright light outside but the room still shadowed and then had lain together and been happy and tired and then made love again. Then they were so hungry that they did not think they would live until breakfast and now they were in the cafe eating and watching the sea and the sails and it was a new day again.

The young couple has settled for a while in a fishing village in

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the South of France, and at first the only hint of a cloud in their sunny idyll comes from David's work: Catherine dislikes being alone when he is writing. Growing restless and wanton, she crops her hair short as a boy's, dresses like a man, and persuades her reluctant husband to try the undescribed "devil things" in bed by his taking the female role while she plays the man. When this diversion palls, she picks up a bisexual woman who moves in with them, and as the more than neurotic wife sinks into destructive madness the beautiful intruder gradually replaces her, first in bed and then in David's hungry affection.

A curious thing, however, happens about halfway through the book, as the sexual round plays itself out. David is writing a story about his adolescence, when he accompanied his father on an elephant hunt in Africa, and as the episodes are completed they alternate with the chapters of Hemingway's novel about love, marriage, and madness. As the two novels move in tandem, *The Garden of Eden* acquires a different mood, and we realize that Hemingway's original plan to write about his first marriage was gradually overwhelmed by his need to justify a life devoted to the perfection and hardship of art. He wanted to show a skeptical world that, no matter what the chaos of Ernest Hemingway the much-married man, his dedication as a writer had always been, as he might have put it, true and honest and good. Perhaps these conflicting purposes lay behind Hemingway's inability to finish *The Garden of Eden*.

For us, reading the book so long after the author's death, some of the most touching moments in the story describe the physical details of Hemingway at his work, writing "in pencil in the cheap, lined, school notebook that was called a cahier and already numbered one in roman numeral. He stopped finally and put the notebook in a suitcase with a cardboard box of pencils and the cone-shaped sharpener, leaving the five pencils he had dulled to point up for the next day. . . ." He had told us about the cahier and the pencils and the sharpener in his memoir *A Moveable Feast*, and now those homely tools of his trade were drawn into a novel as well. How passionately Hemingway wanted us to know that nothing else—wars, wine, or women—could ever matter so much!

It is more difficult to figure out what Maureen Howard had in mind in her fifth novel, *Expensive Habits*. Though she has declared (in that slick temple of trendiness, *Vanity Fair*) that her theme is "celeb-

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rity as an American disease"—a promising idea—this is not borne out in the novel. True, Howard's heroine is, or once was, a best-selling novelist, but this doesn't automatically make her a celebrity. Of course some novelists do become celebrities, but Margaret, as we get to know her, is definitely not in the same league as, say, Tama Janowitz, who gets her picture on the cover of *New York*, goes to parties with Andy Warhol, and promotes her book with a "literary video" of herself at work and play. *That's* celebrity, for a week at least.

Howard does not endow her heroine with the rapacious craving for the limelight of a genuine celebrity. Nor does the fact that Margaret tarted up her shanty-Irish family in one book and defamed her first husband in another mean she's sold out to the bitch goddess. Novelists always distort and exaggerate, and they want to write successful books. This doesn't mean they're corrupt, but that's what Howard wants us to believe about Margaret Flood. When she is felled by heart disease, the refining fire of mortality makes Margaret reach for redemption in the form of a notebook that will tell her clever young son (a precocious sixteen-year-old who says "I live by my wits") the truth she left out of her novels, not only about family and husband but "the material of a decade," the radicals she hung around with in the fifties, McCarthyism, the peace movement.

This is an admirably ambitious scheme, but Howard does not bring it off because she has trussed her large-minded intentions in a style that defeats them at almost every turn. Theoretically there's nothing wrong with trying to capture the nervous staccato rhythms of a woman's mind as she is waiting for open-heart surgery: the fits and starts, the leaps and stumblings of her anxious monologue as she clutches at elusive patches of memory for reassurance. But Maureen Howard's fidgety, chopped-up prose disintegrates into a pseudo-Joycean muddle:

> Old material, folk wisdom—the young or idiotic talking smart. Out of the mouths of babes . . . and time closing in—that too. You have till Whitsun, till cock crow, till sparrow fart. Queen Mag, you have till daybreak. . . . End of our story almost: me and your father—war, conspiracy, commerce, fashion and its gains. Let's not call it the Sixties, my sense of it packaged like a decade. Time running.

So many strings are being plucked here, with such confused avidity, it is too pretentious to become the illuminating mosaic of

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ruminative ironies that Howard struggles to compose. These shards may appear to have something in common with the fragments of minimalism, but Maureen Howard is not one of that number. Her design is intellectually spacious, and she shuttles energetically between past and present, between middle class and underclass (the world of Margaret's Puerto Rican housekeeper), between politics and illness. She is an old-fashioned modernist who doggedly believes that a story told through the disorientations, the lurch and stumble of a fitful consciousness, can dramatize complexities that straightforward narrative neglects. But this approach can succeed only when the writer clearly knows what she is trying to say. Maureen Howard has not defined her psychological or intellectual destination, and gets nowhere. "It's a dark book," she told *Vanity Fair*. Darker than she knows.

Herbert Gold does not make Maureen Howard's mistake of chewing more than he bites off in *A Girl of Forty*. Unlike many American novelists today, Gold has a shrewd and lively interest in contemporary mores and the society that spawns them, and he has never, in the course of a long and prolific career, been tempted by the isolation of the unattached self. He is a conventional novelist in several senses of that not necessarily invidious term: a canny observer of individual lives seen as part of a world that can destroy or sustain them; a graceful, unsentimental celebrant of romantic love; an exemplary defender of the view that things don't just happen arbitrarily, as the postmodernists would have it, they happen for reasons that may be elusive but can be grasped. It is the novelist's task to find these reasons. After such knowledge come the stories.

Gold has lived in San Francisco for many years, and he makes wry use in this novel of his insider's familiarity with the laid-back lotus-land of Northern California. He can also distance himself aesthetically, without forfeiting sympathy or insight, from the fun-worshipping fanatics of that mindlessly physical culture. When the narrator, Frank Curtis, tumbles into an affair with Suki, the Bay Area golden girl, a bit long in the tooth, he knows exactly who she is:

> [Her] philosophy was fairly strict coastal California stuff. Life must be a festival and never finance your house with a variable-rate mortgage. . . . She majored in social graces; sexual avidity was only a minor, perhaps a subcategory of social graces. She spoke of hot tubs, racquetball, skiing, tennis, and working out in the same happy fashion she used for talking about love. . . . So it ranked right up near the top with massage.

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Never mind that these California foodies and exercise nuts have been done before. Gold has an original way of seeing them and judging them. He is not just scornfully amused by Suki and her dotty friends, he is charmed, bemused, and disturbed by their self-deception, for they are not capable of knowing the precarious fragility of the well-toned harmony they take for granted. What makes *A Girl of Forty* more than just another mocking chronicle of San Francisco inanity, psychobabble and promiscuity—Gold isn't savage enough for the icy ridicule of great satire—is the gradual, shocking fulfillment of Frank's uneasy premonitions as Suki's adolescent son, burning with hatred, poisons her charmed existence. What arouses Gold's pathos and dread about Suki's blithely unexamined life is the fate of the children who can't accept or escape or begin to understand the procession of casual lovers, the butterfly devotion that feels more like indifference. When the boy viciously sets out to avenge his squandered innocence, the sunny complacency of California turns black and evil.

A Girl of Forty is not a "big" novel. Its scope is not expansive, and mercifully Herbert Gold does not indulge in the portentous gesture of pinning down San Francisco as the microcosm of America. But what he undertakes, which is not as modest as may at first appear, Gold manages supremely well, and he has, in a telling but unaggressive way, confirmed some of the virtues of old-fashioned fiction.

A feminist reviewer of Gold's novel was offended by his narrator's "urban dude habit of calling Suki a 'lady'," which brings to mind the strangely unremarked, and perhaps unlamented, disappearance of the feminist novel that had its heyday in the 1970s. Remember all those embattled stories about discontented women who abandon husband and children in order to find themselves? The genre, it would seem, has succumbed to the wayward turns of the Zeitgeist. Not that the feminist movement has vanished, but its disciples have obviously had second thoughts about some of their earlier dogma that freedom is incompatible with the responsibilities of motherhood.

As the Zeitgeist goes, so goes the novel, which probably explains the phenomenal success, not only commercial, of a rather sudsy book called *The Good Mother*, by Sue Miller. The beleaguered mother of the story, who loses custody of her three-year-old daughter because of her lover's, and her own, thoughtlessness, has plainly struck a nerve in its readers, one that was dormant in the more strident years of feminism. Miller's tale addresses itself directly to the

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middle-class popular culture which is reflected and reinforced in a magazine like *McCall's* with considerable intelligence. This culture has undeniably turned more conservative in many respects, but it clings fiercely to a woman's inalienable right, a legacy of the sixties, to sexual freedom and fulfillment. The enormous appeal of Miller's novel derives not only from her heroine's agonizing battle to keep her daughter, but also from the homily embedded in the story: in a "caring" world, to use one of the vogue words dear to popular culture, a good mother should not have to be deprived of great sex. The book is of little intrinsic literary interest—Miller's prose is blandly informative, rarely inspired by lyrical imagination. But Miller has very adroitly seized the double-backed moral temper of the moment.

If Sue Miller sounds like *McCall's* at its best, *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood, reminds us, in content if not in style, of *Mother Jones* at its denunciatory worst. In what may be the one unreservedly radical-feminist novel of the year, Atwood offers a grim projection of the American future, a dystopia indebted to such classics as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*.

In the American future envisioned in Atwood's dystopia, around the beginning of the next century, the fundamentalist Christian Right, after assassinating the President and all the members of Congress, has transformed the United States into a draconian theocracy called the Republic of Gilead. Women have been degraded to slaves, and because rampant pollution, toxic wastes, and AIDS have decimated the population, females in their most fertile years become the property of high government officials who have the sacred duty of impregnating their so-called Handmaid. Women are forbidden to read, can work only at menial tasks, cannot own property or utter any words not strictly required by the functions they perform. Dissenters are condemned as political criminals and executed in public as a warning to anyone harboring thoughts of escape or subversion.

Atwood summons up this nightmare prospect with a good deal of inventive skill, yet her cautionary tale fails to frighten us with the horror of its probability. The chilling power of *1984* stemmed from the parallels Orwell could draw, and force us to see, between the totalitarian reality of Soviet Russia and a distant time in which the conceivable becomes actual. Nor was his foresight limited to the eventuality of Russian communism. When we recognize how much of the rhetoric of the Western world in our time doesn't merely resemble Newspeak but *is* Newspeak, we can see how many of Orwell's imaginings anticipated what we have and are today. As Orwell wrote,

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"I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe . . . that something resembling it *could* arrive."

It's doubtful, however, that even the most paranoid radicals and feminists would seriously argue that the Republic of Gilead is whither we are drifting. Atwood is a Canadian poet and novelist who has spent a lot of time in the United States, but she has a very inadequate grasp of the multitudinous diversity of this country's inhabitants and their religion, culture, and politics. Perhaps the push-button resentment that many Canadians feel toward the United States, along with her radical-feminist wrath, feeds Atwood's certainty that something like Gilead will exist in the foreseeable future, but her diabolical vision has no plausible resemblance to American reality. Nor is her case strengthened by her baffling choice of Cambridge, Massachusetts, that bastion of liberal piety, as the capital of her viciously reactionary state. Margaret Atwood has the zealous confidence of ideology, but she lacks the sophisticated political intelligence of Orwell. Without it, *The Handmaid's Tale* cannot achieve the premonitory power of *1984*. Atwood's dystopia is in the end too whimsical to be instructive, a horror movie rather than a warning.

Politics may be a dying language in American writing today, but it is still the lifeblood of Latin-American literature, the importunate and inescapable given of the novelist's art. Revolution, civil war, terrorism, despotic juntas, disappearance, political murder—these are not chance events in Latin America but the convulsive facts of ordinary life. Perhaps this helps us understand why the novelists of Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Peru have sought to embody the political volcano of the everyday in the dreamlike configurations of magic and fantasy: not to deny or turn away from the violence and brutality of politics, but to liberate the autonomous imagination from the oppressive and literally censorious shackles of time and history. It is not just an accident of history that so many contemporary South American novelists—García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Paraguay's Augusto Roa Bastos, to name only a few—have written some of their finest work in exile. Uprooted from their native ground, carrying only the baggage of memory, these writers have drawn their extraordinary innovative energy from the no-man's-land between the phantasmagoria of dreams and the sobering facts of political actuality.

Mario Vargas Llosa returned to Peru in 1980 after many years in exile, but the relentless tug-of-war between hallucination and real-

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ity remains essential to his artistic vision and his fictional methods. In his most recent book, *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, he sets out to explore the nature of political commitment through a Trotskyist revolutionary who in the late fifties had organized an uprising in the Andean village of Jauja. The novelist who narrates the story had been a schoolmate of Alejandro Mayta but lost track of him in the years after the abortive uprising. Jogging along the streets of Lima one morning—a Lima of the mind that is drowning in garbage and on the verge of devastation in a war between guerrillas supported by Russian and Cuban troops, and the ruling junta shored up by United States Marines—he decides to find out what happened to his unlucky school friend.

In a kaleidoscopic series of interviews with former comrades of Mayta, his ex-wife, the aunt who raised him, those who respected him and those who despised him, the novelist hopes to piece together the truth about the Andean fiasco and, along the way, learn why Mayta became a revolutionary, and whether his fervid idealism survived the years of imprisonment and obscurity that followed the Andean adventure. Bit by bit the pieces of the past fall into place. The uprising, it turns out, was a preposterous farce. Mayta's splinter group had only seven members, none of whom had any faith in their bumbling, inarticulate comrade as a revolutionary leader. He is incompetent at mustering the weapons and men he needed, and his cadre in the end consists of seven local schoolboys for whom the uprising is a great lark. They don't know what Mayta is talking about when he cries, "Why don't we sing 'The International,' comrades?" so they belt out their school song and the national anthem instead. When he tries to enlist some peasants into his toy army, the bold conspirator is unnerved when they ask what help they can expect from the Soviet Union. "He didn't have the heart to talk to them about the betrayed revolution, the Stalinist bureaucratization, about Trotsky. He felt it wouldn't be prudent to confuse them with all that stuff just yet." Some Trotskyist.

The portrait of Mayta as a complex exemplar of revolutionary temperament and circumstance gradually becomes more sharply defined, and so does the author's sardonic exasperation with the revolutionary's political naivete and his grandiose hopes for his two-bit conspiracy. Neither does Vargas Llosa ignore the poignancy of Mayta's futile dedication. Yet in the end we are left with a nagging question about the modernist techniques Vargas Llosa employs in

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exploring the "real life" of a political idealist. He shifts the focus with continual, sometimes confusing, rapidity from one person to another, from one version of events to a subtly different one, from Peru in the 1950s to Peru in the present day to the Peru being destroyed in the apocalyptic future. But eventually, through the hyperkinetic tangle of voices and episodes, we think we have clearly grasped what Vargas Llosa wants us to understand about the nature and perils of political commitment, betrayal, and disaffection.

Why, then, does this passionately political writer—who is at the same time admirably level-headed about the illusions and reality of contemporary politics—succumb to a perverse urge, in the final section of the novel, to turn the whole enterprise on its head, and seek to deny precisely the virtues of political fiction he has been affirming, or so he led us to believe? When the novelist-narrator, who is obviously speaking for Vargas Llosa, declares toward the end that "in a novel there are always more lies than truths. . . . This investigation, these interviews, I didn't do it all so I could relate what really happened . . . but so I could lie and know what I'm lying about," we are bewildered, not enlightened.

Is "lie" really the word for the inventions and images of literature, particularly a novel concerned with revolutionary politics? Would Vargas Llosa regard the political novels of Ignazio Silone or Arthur Koestler as "lies" rather than grave confrontations with the failure of socialism and the anguish of political despair? One can only wonder impatiently why Vargas Llosa has chosen to diminish the power of his political intelligence with the overingenious subversions of an obsolete modernism.

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Leonard Kriegel

WRITERS AND ETHNICITY

A few weeks ago, I received a letter from an organization devoted to helping American writers keep their economic heads above water. Among the tasks it assumes on behalf of America's writers, Poets & Writers, Inc. sponsors readings and workshops for members of the profession who require additional income to practice their "sullen art"—a description which fits every writer of my acquaintance. But like other well-intentioned organizations, Poets & Writers has discovered our newest cultural growth stocks—race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identification. How else explain a request that writers choose, from a list of ten the organization provided, as many as three "ethnic, political, and social groups" with which they would like to work?

The mail arrived while I was browsing through De Crevecouer's *Letters From An American Farmer*, a book I find it helpful to look at whenever I need to remind myself of how this nation was once viewed. Engrossed in De Crevecouer's two hundred year-old paean to the "new man" in the New World, I put aside the letter from Poets & Writers. Long before historians and writers happened upon the idea, De Crevecouer had been a passionate advocate of the "melting pot." Enjoying diversity, he was convinced that life in America would be different, and that even before the Revolution this nation already had changed ineradicably the way men related to other men. Of course, De Crevecouer's *Letters* simply embodied an idea common to many Europeans in the late eighteenth century. "*Amerika*," wrote Goethe, "*du hast es besser.*" And most of the civilized world echoed his sentiments.

Such sentiments have long since passed out of fashion. In the early 1960s, writers and historians discovered the attractions of race and ethnicity, and soon after that a sexual ethos in which everything was allowed and nothing mattered was transformed into a close approximation of a religious tenet. Few writers today could possibly speak of the "melting pot" without an acute sense of embarrassment. On the other hand, most nonliterary people believe that Americans are different because they have followed Mark Twain's advice and allowed *all* of the juices to swap. Perhaps the only saving grace I observed in the recent Miss Liberty weekend was the sentiment, uttered

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both by New Yorkers and out-of-town visitors, about the blessings of what television reporters like to call "our multi-ethnic heritage." Given the magnitude of all that patriotic huckstering, there was at least something hopeful and refreshing in this.

Even a casual reading of De Crevecouer reveals how appealing his sense of American "newness" is. Like most true believers, he was engaged in the attempt both to sell his vision of America and his sense of himself—certainly as praiseworthy a task as selling what the "official sponsors" of the Miss Liberty Weekend were selling. The French immigrant to New York who Americanized the *petite noblesse* name of Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crevecouer to the J. Hector St. John with which he signed his *Letters* was seeking to become the very creature his book extolled, a "new man," an American. He changed his name and he lied about his profession, for he was no great shakes as a farmer either.

Both the name change and the assumption of the role of modest tiller of the soil were already in the American mode. For De Crevecouer, America was a place where Europeans like him could cast aside their feudal pasts and begin over again. The name change certainly would have met with the approval of those Ellis Island officials who, a hundred years after De Crevecouer's *Letters* were first published, turned what they considered unpronounceable Czech and Polish and Russian names into Smith and Dale and Evans. And the assumption of agrarian virtues would have touched the glint of gold in any Hollywood producer's eye.

De Crevecouer was a poseur, but he was an American poseur —which is to say that, like Whitman, he embraces the world of ordinary men and women in his vision of the self. It is not only his passionate faith in American newness which captured my attention as I leafed through the pages of his *Letters*, it was his equally passionate belief that the many divisions which had plagued Europe—ethnic, religious, political—would simply disappear on the shores of the New World. For in America man was simply less encumbered by the senseless separations European life and culture imposed. This is what Goethe means when he speaks of America having it better. And it was the very quality that gave De Crevecouer faith in the American future. "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men," he wrote spiritedly, "whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world."

And with these brave words still resounding in my mind, I

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turned to the letter from Poets & Writers, Inc., with its list of "ethnic, political, and social groups" before whom they would permit me to sell my wares. In place of De Crevecouer's "new man," Poets & Writers offered me the following:

> A.Black B.Hispanic/Latin C.Puerto Rican D.Chicano E.Asian-American F.Native American G.Feminist H.Gay Men I.Lesbian J.Other (please specify)

"What then is the American, this new man?" asked De Crevecouer proudly. Poets & Writers was apparently willing to tell him. I read the list. I reread it. I studied it, trying to find a place for De Crevecouer. But the truth was undeniable. With or without his name change, De Crevecouer was an *Other.* And in the grab bag of categories which Poets & Writers had unleashed on my America with all the self-righteous certitude of the God of Moses unleashing his ten plagues on the Egyptians, he was by no means alone. The English, French, Scottish, Irish, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes—those he had happily called "this promiscuous breed" who, in coming together, had fashioned the "new man"—were also *Other.* And they could be joined by the Irish, Italians, and Jews in my old neighborhood in the Bronx, about whom I had written a book some ten years earlier. Like De Crevecouer's "promiscuous breed," their stamp was *Other.* Of course, they had a great deal of company. Saroyan's Armenians, Kate Chopin's Creoles, Algren's Poles, Steinbeck's Okies—all could be classified *Other.* Eliot was an *Other*, and Prufrock was an *Other.* That Pound was an *Other* had, I felt, a certain poetic justice to it. But I, too, was an *Other*, as were my sons and wife. Even my eighty-six year-old mother, convinced that she is somehow *more* American than her friends and neighbors who are also immigrants because she managed to arrive here on George Washington's birthday in 1920—my mother, it turns out, is as much an *Other* as Pound, since she can claim membership in neither of the list's categories specifically reserved for women, lesbian or feminist.

It always has seemed to me that classification of any kind is a writer's enemy. And yet, this was a list created *by* writers ostensibly *for* writers. The least I could do was to give it a writer's attention. Like the Homeric Catalogue of Ships in *The Iliad* and like the rules and regulations relentlessly set down in the Book of Leviticus, here was a list whose hidden meanings begged for the kind of textual ex-

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plication I hadn't practiced since the first time I read Brooks & Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. Who but a determined exegetical Talmudist could explain the reasoning that stood behind the separation of Puerto Rican from Hispanic-slash-Latin? Were the writers among Poets & Writers hinting that Puerto Ricans were not Hispanics? Or were the poets in that organization trying to tell me that Puerto Ricans were Latin in language and religion but Anglo-Saxon in all else?

Even if Poets & Writers did not intend *Other* to be an outlaw or a misfit, the ramifications of the list for American culture are considerable. But what exactly is the purpose of this list? Was it being offered merely to satisfy some state or federal funding regulation? Was it a Swiftian commentary on the Lilliputian vision which has, of late, become incorporated in our idea of book reviewing and literary criticism? Will the day soon come when only black women critics will review books by black women writers and New York Irish writers will insist that New York Irish critics are the only reviewers capable of "understanding" their work? (A friend recently suggested that the day had already arrived. More and more, we see books by black writers being reviewed by blacks, books by feminists being reviewed by feminists, etcetera. As a result, an already fragmented culture becomes increasingly fragmented, and one is not forced to confront challenges to the dominant culture. Few white critics today write about black writers, and many of them are all-too-willing to hide behind the argument that only blacks can understand blacks. Sometimes, nonsense is convenient.) Maybe Poets & Writers had created the list as a sly and deliberately comic move in the latest American cultural shell game. Perhaps the list was simply a way of telling the world that the process of division and subdivision—this potpourri of racial, sexual, ethnic, and political endorsements—was potentially as infinite as it was meaningless.

And perhaps it was shortsighted on my part to allow the list to irritate me. After all, I had no quarrel with writers for whom gender was the chief source of the imagination. And I knew enough about the workings of race in America not to question those of my fellow writers for whom it was the most pressing of realities. A good deal of my own writing had been about people now lumped together, no doubt as a subcategory of Poets & Writers's *Other*, as "white ethnics" (although I had written about them, I reminded myself, for the same reasons a writer born in a small town in Georgia is likely to write about small-town Southerners: they were the people I knew who had lived the stories I knew well enough to tell).

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And even while I was writing about "white ethnics," I had no illusions about ethnicity. Like gender and race and politics, it is, for a writer, a potential mine field, threatening to blow his work right off the map. A writer must guard against confusing the sources of imagination with imagination itself. It is for this reason that Saul Bellow and the late Bernard Malamud would repeatedly insist that American writers who were Jews were simply that and not Jewish-American writers. Obviously, anyone who reads Bellow and Malamud can see the extent to which they were influenced both by Yiddish and the lives of the first-and second-generation Jews in America with whom they came of age. But they each understood that for a writer, all classifications are arbitrary, and they threaten to pull him away from his imaginative purpose.

And such classifications pose an equal threat to writers when they are applied to our audience. They create divisions that are not only shortsighted and stupid but that are ultimately destructive to good writing. Any kind of list is an implicit denial of imaginative truth, since it insists on the preeminence of categories. And good writing has nothing to do with lists. Good writing is not some child's game of ethnic or racial or sexual pick-up-sticks. And an organization devoted to serving writers simply has no right to endorse, either by its own actions or by implication, the kinds of invidious distinctions this list makes—*not even if its funding depends upon making such distinctions.*

Writers write and readers read. And life is occasionally simpler than we writers believe. One seeks in literature not the affirmation of group identity but that "shock of recognition" Melville spoke of. I happen to admire the novels of William Kennedy. I do not admire Kennedy because he is an Albany Irishman but because of what he has managed to create out of the lives and the language of the Irish in Albany. It is, after all, language and imagination that link writers to each other and to their work. But given the kind of list created by Poets & Writers, one might assume that the link between, say, Bellow and Updike and Eudora Welty is that they can all be stuffed, along with the audience for their books, under the category *Other.*

It seems to me that we have been, for the past two decades, virtually buried beneath these categories. And for any American writer to herd either himself or his audience into the arbitrary ghettoes suggested by the list offered by Poets & Writers is absurd. If lists are the best we writers can create, then we might just as well leave the writer's task, the task of imaginatively re-creating the world, to pollsters and accountants and statisticians, all of whom are better able to deal

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with lists than we are. And it seems to me high time to pause in the endless quest to differentiate group from group, audience from audience. This just may be as good a time as any to take a fresh look at the much-maligned "melting pot" and at De Crevecouer's "new man." Even after one grants that the "new man" had a more difficult birth and led a more troubled existence than we once believed, if there is such a thing as an American character then it deserves a better fate than strangulation through the kind of narrow-minded stupidity suggested by Poets & Writers' list. As the "white ethnics" in my old neighborhood were fond of saying, "Enough is enough." And too much is more than enough. I, for one, have had too much of the implications of the list sent me by Poets & Writers.

As a writer, I have simply had it with these divisions and subdivisions. And I have had it with the attempt to pigeonhole American literary culture into these desiccated holes. What made American culture interesting was what made the language of that culture so rich—its variety and diversity. Whitman and Dickinson, Twain and James, Faulkner and Bellow—there is still something remarkably appealing about the prospect of letting the juices swap. It was that quality which appealed to Twain and to De Crevecouer, and I find that it has once again begun to appeal to me. Long before he was an *Other*, De Crevecouer was an American writer. And even an American writer in our culturally meretricious times should know that he can choose more than three.

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POEMS

W. S. Merwin

EMPTY WATER

I miss the toad
who came all summer
to the limestone
water basin
under the Christmasberry tree
imported in 1912
from Brazil for decoration
then a weed on a mule track
on a losing
pineapple plantation
now an old tree in a line
of old trees
the toad came at night
first and sat in the water
all night and all day
then sometimes at night
left for an outing
but was back in the morning
under the branches among
the ferns the green sword leaf
of the lily
sitting in the water
all the dry months
gazing at the sky
through those eyes
fashioned of the most
precious of metals
come back
believer in shade
believer in silence and elegance
believer in ferns
believer in patience
believer in the rain

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THE INEVITABLE LIGHTNESS

The roads and everything on them fly up and dissolve
a net rises from the earth
the cobweb in which it was dying
and the earth breathes naked with its new scars
and sky everywhere

Jessica Greenbaum

INVENTING DIFFICULTY

"All music is what awakens from you
when you are reminded by the instruments."
—Walt Whitman, "A Song of the Occupations"

"(Contemporary) American poetry lacks ideas."
—John Haines, "The Hole in the Bucket"

You wouldn't say genius invented this world alone,
Overthrowing difficulty to make our days waterwheels,
bucket turning bucket of light into evening,
and that underwater half rising to its tiara, Queen
Noon at the coronation. Perhaps a songwriter's

responsible for wind's attachment to leaves,
for the inseparable lyrics to earthly beauty we've memorized
before birth and come here with, already on our lips;
the way hearing "Prufrock" makes a slow groove in the brain,
then plays *you*, hearing it again. Poets

make reunions, but what do we invent? "American poetry
lacks ideas." I turn this thought over while testing
almond croissant around my city. . . . Usually deluxe and banal
simultaneously, (a town my contemporaries *could* write into being)
today her housecoat familiarity

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is undone by spring light, which loves her. If the world
came from stellar intercourse, two stars bathing together
and spinning us off, that's why we're spun off
in the morning, unmooring and drifting away, casting underwater
for the dream's biggest fish. Out in the glossy day,

sometimes the three dimensions detach, a circus family
jumping from each other's shoulders, and what's left are life-
echoing surfaces, glorified like the lake by a prostrate sun
whose back you ride, casting beneath the lid of imagination
for why we're here. It's simple,

inventing difficulty. With any five lines on the white page
of morning, I can fashion a skeleton of my world: a woman
fishing. The grasp of tedium and miracles keeps her from becoming
a let-go balloon, keeps her inventing both path
and obstacle toward a reunion with happiness.

Julie Agoos

LUNAR ECLIPSE AT A NEW ENGLAND FUNERAL

At the funeral, we sing a hymn
she sang for us so often, that our voices
in the cold church are cloudy, and tentative:
concentrating so hard on death,
we can almost hear her as the organ softens.
Then in the silence after the last prayer,

we whisper our way past the coffin leaving flowers
as if we could obscure that heavenly image.
We sigh the long way to the graveyard through tall grass;
along the ground, our stilt shadow bodies
slide off into the blackberry bushes. We can hear
the toads and crickets passing over them,

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the crushed sound of the grass, and the crumpled lilacs
falling into a mass of shadow lilacs
already lying there. Several low notes
sound from an owl, and each grows shorter.
From the pasture above the graveyard, the coydogs' howls
collect like a fabulous blanket over us:

the moon, the sort of federal color she most
admired, has a creeping softness that increases
each quarter hour. And suddenly the air
is so sensitive! We smell the scent
of lilacs on her table, hear her grace,
high and ardent, see ourselves, grouped

like a nimbus in the lampglow by the old piano.
Fight the Good Fight, she trills, while the gentle
shadows pressed against the windows soon
overlay the house; and the slow,
profound voice of the honorable
reverend, murmuring, *O, Lord, protect*,

and rolling over the swelled ground toward us,
slips into the shadow of our crescent
like the indirect moonlight now
disappearing in earnest under the rolling
shadow of this blank planet. And there are strange
pictures in all he says, until we wonder

where the dead go, who are the dead?
Then her dog lies down beside her granite tombstone,
a voice calls: *Hush, Gulley, hush* . . .
Her long name glowing last
is draped in a ribbon of darkness like a statue,
and we are divided from her forever now.

But how much greater she seems to us since
we have seen just how the earth makes its full
exchanges, and how death is not, not really
like this place, but public, historical,
and in it each moment of the cycle
—month, day, hour, slow minute

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and slower second—completely tears apart,
most of all, that it has already happened to her,
leaving us here. Another hour will bare
one darkened half of this family graveyard,
and though the reverend, murmuring again
Lord, save her! seems to us half savior, half devil,

for now it is easy to wait: standing on solid
ground, shadowless, we see images
of fire, whole cities dotting the darkness.

Rachel Hadas

SUMMER IN WHITE, GREEN, AND BLACK

In the beginning summer stretches out
like one enormous sheet
of greenest paper, but ideas of white
grow overlaid with leaves,
become an avenue shaded by desires
that ramify and tremble. . . . Leaf-shaped shadows waver.
Enchanted, slow,
the stroller glides along this avenue
where waving branches cancel out the high
hot glare of summer sky.
Soon long exposure to
such generosity of green
turns the white page a sickly eye-ease shade,
then pale bland black
like asphalt freshly spread:
smooth, soft, all but sticky in the heat,
seeming pristine but not
new, just a latest coat.

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The leaves are trembling as before a storm.
All of them will fall, but later on.
Earliest shudderings stipple the white
page already piecemeal into air—
absorbed, clean gone.
Summer is done. The white
page might almost never have been there
but for this surface offered you to write.

Yankev Glatshteyn

MOYSHE-LEYB'S VOICE

(1932)

I

In Tarshish stands a gilded cage.
In the cage sits a pipsqueak and gives everyone the finger.
He eats carrot *tsimmes*, stewed plums, and snuffles a tune—
Eagle-bagged, livesolong, I'm Hotsmakh-Tsingitang.

Night descends in gilded glory.
(How I wish you could see a Tarshish night)
But the puny Jew in the gilded cage
Turns a somersault and gives everyone the finger.
He eats maize, *latkes*, pancakes, chopped liver,
And snorts a melody:
Eagle-bagged, livesolong, I'm Hotsmakh-Tsingitang.

And when the Tarshish roofs are crowned with stars,
Night spins a sleep-web around the singing pipsqueak.
Then comes a princess the size of a hand
And tickles the puny Jew where it's needed with a fan of singing,
The sleeping Hotsmakh-Tsingitang.

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II

The princess braids an enchanted loaf of quiet halleloollabies.
And it feels as good as a steambath to the Tarshish Jew.
He sleeps in the cage as in a gilded cradle,
He mates in his sleep and weeps with joy—
Eagle-bagged, livesolong, I'm Hotsmakh-Tsingitang.

When the dear princess leaves, the night is fear.
The wiseman sits alone in the cage.
He broods, thinks, and calculates.
Death strides up and says hello to him
(O my darling, my life, my cursed cry,
Why do you leave me alone in the night)
Death greets him with singing—
Hello, Hotsmakh-Tsingitang.
And suddenly a quadrille,
And out of the blue a wild whirl:
Einstein, Heine, Job, Freud,
Yehuda Halevi, Jesus, and the Ludmire Maid,
All hop to the song,
Hotsa, hotsa, hotsatsa.
Hotsmakh-Tsingitang.
As the male in the cage dances along,
He gives everyone the finger.
He grabs a broom and shakes it like a palmfrond,
Shake-a-shake it here, shake-a-shake it there,
(With the restlessness of a wolf and the calm of a bear)
To all the corners of our Judeo-Christian Erudition's Howd'yajudaism.

A gust of wind—
The singer, the wiseman, the thinker disappear.
Once again he's left painfully alone.
The hunchback hag East Side hobbles along,
How're ya doin' kid, you hump of my soul?
At my place there is feasting, glutting, and guzzling,
But I feel so desperately alone, I don't know where to go.
I'd gladly be baptized thirteen times
If only the goyim didn't stink.
So I will watch over you here and lull you with lullabies.

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Then he closes his eyes and from deathly sleepy calm
Begins to toss out glowing words:
Although here-and-now they shovel down pieces of fruitcake,
We've permanently portioned out the Leviathan for them later—
The silk-hatted traitors,
The stinking gods
Of my Jewish street.

Over Tarshish glows the first hour of dawn,
But in the gilded cage there is no one.
And leaves and grasses and birds and sun
Sing in a nostalgic song—
Eagle-bagged, livesolong,
Where are you, Hotsmakh-Tsingitang?

Translated from the Yiddish by Kathryn Hellerstein

Ellen Bryant Voigt

NIGHTSHADE

The dog lay under the house, having crawled
back beyond the porch, bellying
beneath the joists through rocks and red dirt
to the cool stone foundation where it died
as the children called and sobbed;
and now their father had to wrench it out,
the one he had been breaking to handle birds.

This was a man of strictest moderation,
who had heard a dash of strychnine in its meat
could be a tonic for a dog, an extra edge.
He loved that dog, and got the dosage wrong.
And I loved my father—
I was among the children looking on—
and for years would not forgive him:

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without pure evil in the world,
there was no east or west, no polestar
and no ratifying dove. I sat inside
the small white house for hours,
deaf to the world, playing my two songs,
one in a major, the other in a sad, minor key.

Steven Cramer

FOR NOW

This morning letting the trees stand
over the unappeasable man I've become,
I'm loitering in an unused backyard plot,
afraid a neighbor might lift up a shade
and recognize me and remain unmoved,
certain I've let my nature grow
brittle and veined, skin of a leaf
stretched over a stone, the muddy reek
of last night's rain drying, and the air
inside me dusty as the air inside a tent;
and feeling ridiculous and skittish
with this mortal look on my face,
I rub my thumb across the bark,
follow the limbs that divide and turn
invisible, each pointing out a new ambiguity
the longer I look; and I look to my windows,
three black boxes housing my absence now,
and above them the late-August sky, white
as water churned by someone's hand; then out
through a weedy gap in the wire fence,
a teenage couple shortcuts from nowhere
to nowhere, stops—the girl touching
the boy's shoulder, lightly, for balance,
shaking a stone or twig from her shoe,

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then both walking on as if to prove
nothing is random or unasked for, even
this startling morning we've stumbled into:
the only one, for now, we know.

Katherine Janowítz

THE LOST TRIBE
XV

And they took it
all into themselves like
water into sand and
carried it with them like
hidden parcels of sugar
and salt they took because
they were afraid to go with-
out and it was the memorizing
of a town and the memorizing
of rooms and they became
scholars of details and in
their goodby they missed
nothing and were wiser than
they had ever been
and they were fierce in
what they knew.

David Solway

ANTIPAXOS

The sea's black metal
the salt-white cliffs

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the sun, like a soldering iron,
fuses the gull to its peak

and you wonder what lived here once
  recording its passage with a feather
  with shells printed in rock

you light a cigarette
—the wind smokes it down for you

slabs of limestone
  shelve into the sea,
  flat, smooth, felt-green,
  the gaming tables of the gods
  on which cubes of rock lie scattered

walls of granite
  light-pocked, grainy with spume-blast
  return no echo;
you play with the outboard
  changing speeds
for a kind of reassurance

plates of coast jammed up
segmented layers, bands of time

the buckle and crease
of some forgotten cataclysm

light hammering sparks
off a gull's beak

now a lighthouse
  driven like a claim-stake into mineral
presents an angle
  the eye of the tower
    an angle

half-mile slates
  of cantilevered rock

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so perfectly weighted
you can't decide:
geology or architecture?

the back of the lighthouse
  windowless

the sea cave's skull
  filled with cold
as if scraped out with a knife

and stones
  with their linear
remember
  more than we give them credit for

you light a cigarette
—the wind puts it out for you

the salt-white cliffs
the sea's black metal

Karen Fish

THE TUB

I sit on the green silk bank of the stream
watching a group of Canada geese fret over three small goslings.
Behind me, the road takes its turn,
empty, just a place for a fox to run along in the open.

The mountains in the distance are pewter—
like the pitcher, cool and sweating on my grandmother's lace tablecloth.
The barn next to the house, I know what it contains:
rows and rows of pigeons, shifting on the thick beams

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near the roof. When the light has only one thing left to do,
to fall into itself,

the birds will move out
over the fields, churning the sky.

In the white house over there, in an empty kitchen,
there is a woman, nude, crouched
in a tin tub—knee deep in water
in a shaft of early evening sunlight which falls

across her back like ash.

Simon Perchik

122

You will fatten your fingers on mud
as soldiers have always marched, are fed
powerful fields, fierce hillsides

and your heart that once measured time
chip at the underground mist
the mud-prints where your steps

stopped to heal—you will feed your hand
as leaves still lift their tree
and the strong current in ice
thaw, the water
re-heated, shrinking, giving in.

You eat forever! both arms around the Earth
and in the evenings your breath
the damp scent for all footsteps
—I come to your grave

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with boundary stones, remove my shoes
lessen and from the sky
its galaxies and from the ground
soaked with tears it can't remember.
I bring you stones and the way back.

Robert B. Shaw

CLOUDSCAPE

To a man sick or in prison I imagine
clouds passing must be a comfort, bringing
rifts of distance into a room's sameness.
The June high pomp of their elephantine
processions, the autumn wind-disheveled
horse tails and manes tell the time of the realm.
Then there are all those protean tableaux
convincing to none but each expositor:
one man's duck is another man's dragon.
Only the other day I saw
Ely Cathedral serenely wandering east:
nobody else would have. Think of being
all things to all men, of having your silver
lining accepted all over as credit,
of being above it all. They have it easy,
or so it seems from this bow-window where
I spend so much time following their maneuvers,
overcome some days by so massive and blank
a longing that it takes minutes to remember
that I am almost never ill and always free to go.

THE FLOATER

They always used to say, demanding elders,
schoolmasters in manner or in fact,
that this boy was a hopeless drifter, lacked

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direction, drive, and didn't give a damn.
Floating face to the sky on a summer lake,
not getting anywhere fast, he called to mind
calmly the old reports of still no progress,
and knew them true—years, years had passed,
and here he was, the flagrant foil to their
frustrations which he could not make his own.
And there was no excuse. He hadn't been there
to watch his father running to catch that train,
only imagined the platform-edging gravel
galling the knees, the loaded briefcase tumbled,
the fingers popping off the collar button.
Some people can't relax to save their lives.
Arching his back on water's ample roundness,
marvelling how it will just as soon uphold
a hippo or a splinter, he felt drained of weight
and curiously transparent, like a teardrop
gliding across a wide unblinking eye.

Michael Benedikt

OF MAKING LARGE DECISIONS CALMLY (DISQUISITION AT A PICNIC)

1.

I have noted, that many people wisely wish to (& do tend to)
defer making decisions of any great consequence on a
spur-of-the-moment basis; I know that *I* do, particularly
when it comes to

Making such decisions inside the jaws of the proverbial vice
—in effect with a gun at the back of my neck, which is when
some overly insistent yo-yo is telling me, all the time, "hurry up."

Making large decisions in that manner (I have concluded) is, strictly,
for the birds; & anyone who requires that we make such decisions,

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that way, is attempting to get us to behave in a careless, wasteful way

Befitting bird-brains, dim-wits, schmucks, & losers. For, I think, thought is clearly necessary, prior to coming to conclusions much larger than whether, at a picnic, one should flick a flying red ant, off the sandwich where it has just landed.

2.

On the other hand, there are of course some realms which Tradition says
should be governed, strictly, by a kind of crazy, nutso Passion. Who we're attracted to, for example, falls into that category, with a well-known

Clatter. Still, even while we are focussing in that wise—fixating in a passionate fit on, say, something immensely stirring-up such as the pretty way somebody we've just met may have of picking up

A teacup—or cogitating, as us humans are wont to, upon a pretty smile,
a handsome bosom, or a nice set of buns—we are still, I think, nonetheless on the verge of having to make

A decision of significant weight. I mean, we are after all, in at least some of those instances, faced with a person we may possibly be getting a lot closer to; and since heads tend to get close to other heads while making love, & minds have the habit of rubbing off on one another—even omitting the possibility that they may be

Around later, so that we'll be spending some time with them in the morning
(&, in some particularly appealing instances, in the afternoon)—aren't we confronting the possibility of letting loose, in our

Psychic china-shop, a potential elephant? I must say, this ant
in the meantime, is certainly busy, is starting up with the lettuce & dragging its feet around in the mayonnaise on top of the ham, & is
starting to get tiny sprinklets in my eyes. And plus that, I notice, a butterfly has just landed on my nose!

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3.

So where does that leave passion, then; where spontaneity? Just try to
apply any of those well-known "go-with-the-flow" & "he-who-hesitates-
is-lost" theories to almost anything in the real, practical world
much larger than purchasing a gumdrop

At a fire sale—to buying a pretty coat made out of flimsy material,
for example, investing in a book on the basis of its clever cover,
or buying a stock because it once slipped sideways into a fast-talking
broker's conversation, or a house to live in because it's

Only a stone's throw from a delicatessen which sells fresh herrings or where
you noticed that the salesgirl wears exceptionally outré earrings
& where, in most practical things, will you find yourself? Stuck with

A long-term fardel on the basis of a whim, probably; while somebody else
who took a moment to think about what they were doing is feeling
calmly, about the large things in life; & sitting really pretty, with
just the things they really want! Why,

The nature of things as they are in the world of actual significances,
the world of hard facts as opposed to the world that's always
whooping it up about how "everything is relative," could actually
turn you away from

Doing Something Rash if you thought about it—maybe even making you think
twice about, say, hiring a guru to make you feel at one with everything,
during a weekend at the Catskills or the mountains nearby Monterey;
even making one think twice about, say, committing large
quantities of time to reading the mountain

Of vague & crappy poetry that's around mixed in with the good stuff
& that

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renders one weaker in the world rather than stronger while gifting
one expensively with the illusion that one has been receiving

"Internal Insights." & That—after stopping to think twice about it—would
be o.k., I think! In fact, what I'd recommend, at least temporarily, is a total withdrawal from those worlds of weakening phenomena that can distract one from making clear &

Good (i.e., slowly-thought-out) Decisions. & This, for the sake of acting
& what's more training even the so-called "reactions" to react in a way that's patient & well-paced, not just

Merely for the sake of the exercise or for the theoretical practise of the art of self-discipline, but simply so as enable us
To Get Further Control Over Our Lives. Could anybody stand that? I know

I could. Why, there's a whole world of opportunity out there! Except that,
as I say this, there's now this ant flying up into the air with a little piece of lettuce-leaf in its mouth; a butterfly flying off with a

Grain of sugar between its feet; & a hummingbird who looks quite happy with
its slice of tomato & the lost ham. How can we steel ourselves more?

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BOOKS

BRODSKY

LESS THAN ONE. SELECTED ESSAYS. By Joseph Brodsky. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $25.00.

Joseph Brodsky's *Less Than One* is a stunning book—the most impressive collection of essays I have read in a long time. No doubt, I am taken with it partly because it corresponds to my idea of the literary mind at its best—by which I mean not simply a subtle mind attentive to literature but one that filters a wide range of ideas through a literary sensibility and through a centralized way of perceiving things. It is the opposite of the kind of academicism that juggles other people's ideas and categories and rehearses theories as though they had nothing to do with the objects they presumably were meant to consider.

What are these essays about? They are about everything—though always dealing with, or speculating about, everything in terms of some literary or polemical or personal experience. Even in the essays about Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Auden as well as those about tyranny, Byzantium, or his early life in Russia, Brodsky ruminates about the West, the East, the idea of civilization, cultural identities, power, old and new imperialisms, democracy, language, literary history, time, space, war, peace, and other large themes. But always the poetic concerns show through. He thinks usually in metaphors, perhaps too much, maybe not; he freely associates, perhaps too much; he is frequently elegiac about the figures he admires, again maybe too much for my own tendency to understate. He is bold and slashing in his observations and judgements—like a street fighter endowed with a mind. There are shortcomings, but they are minor.

The literary pieces sparkle, especially those about the Russian poets and novelists. And they have the added quality of never being too far from politics. I cannot judge his belief that Akhmatova and Mandelstam are two of the greatest, if not the greatest, modern poets, or that Tsvetaeva and Platonov are among the outstanding modern prose writers. But his discussion of them has the plausibility which is all that first-rate criticism can offer: it is highly technical and formal yet without the unhistorical and pedantic qualities of either the textualists or the new crop of literary theorists. But what is even more

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striking is his almost transcendent view of the power of poetry, especially in poets like Akhmatova and Mandelstam. This is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold, who was, after all, trying to save civilization, but it seems a little excessive, especially in relation to the enormous body of small-minded, dutiful poetry—and prose—that is ground out today like sausages. On the other hand, it is important to remember that Brodsky came out of the Russian tradition where literature, particularly now, is the strangled voice of the Russian mind, and is the most powerful, the deepest, and the most lasting form of dissidence. Even when it is most private, it is also the most public form of expression. As Brodsky says at one point:

> A poet gets into trouble because of his linguistic, and, by implication, his psychological superiority, rather than because of his politics.

And:

> A song is a form of linguistic disobedience, and, by implication, its sound casts a doubt on a lot more than a concrete political system; it questions the entire existential order. And the number of its adversaries grows proportionately.

This is one of the reasons why, I take it, so much of Russian poetry, even lyric verse, has a declamatory and strident tonal quality —a quality that in someone of Yevtushenko's limitations sounds like a programmatic assault on its audience.

Two of the essays are remarkable feats of criticism. Each is a critical marathon in the form of a long dissection of a single poem: one an elegiac tribute to Rilke by Tsvetaeva, the other by Auden. Both are line by line examinations of meter, rhyme, theme, tone, mood, personal associations, relation—or lack of it—to literary traditions, and to the cultural and political implications of the poems. What is most remarkable about these intensive tributes is that they do not in the least resemble the kind of textual criticism that exhibits the dexterity and ingenuity of the critic. They both have the magical touch of a fellow poet reconstructing the imaginative process and the linguistic means of transforming a world of moods, recollections and associations into a poem. So uncanny is Brodsky's identification with Tsvetaeva and with Auden that it is almost as though these were Brodsky's own poems and he was describing giving birth to them

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himself. If a critic is disposed to engage in any kind of textual analysis, he could do worse than to take these essays as a model.

There is also a very moving memoir about his early life with his parents, with the seductive title of "In a Room and a Half," the writing of which jumps at you as he recalls his boyhood through a film of sadness and nostalgia. His description, peppered with a sprinkling of the impishness of the rebellious boy charged with hooliganism by the Soviet police, is particularly engaging.

But the most provocative piece in the book, called "Catastrophes in the Air," is a biting and disturbing probe into the quality of Soviet fiction since the Revolution. The essay stretches the limits of criticism as it goes far beyond the usual critiques of a literature produced in what Brodsky believes to be the most tyrannical and cruelest state in all of history. We know about the tragic fate of the arts in a police state; and we saw the writing of the dissidents as a reassuring sign of intellectual and personal courage. But Brodsky goes more deeply into the destruction of the Russian mind and of the bold and inventive spirit that produced the very great Russian literary tradition. Brodsky argues that the vulgarity and the lies of the ruling ideology not only have put their stamp on the obedient Soviet writers but also have affected the imagination of the dissidents. It is not that Brodsky fails to appreciate the wholly admirable achievements of the dissidents, many of whom are his friends. But, says Brodsky, instead of continuing the dissonant tradition of nineteenth-century Russian fiction, that reached its peak in the novels of Dostoevsky (whom, it will be recalled, Nietzsche called the "great psychologist"), the dissidents have been satisfied with heroic gestures of defiance and rejection. They failed, argues Brodsky, to break out of the mold of a banality and vulgarity that is imposed on the entire society. Their rejection of the political system, according to Brodsky, uses the same literary means that the official writers employ to conform to the regime. This is a view I find convincing, even though I do not have an intimate knowledge of the literary and political atmosphere in Russia. But I did sense the backwardness of Russian prose today. In a review I wrote in *Commentary* of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, I indicated that it was a conventional novel, despite its heroic intentions. I thought that even the boldest Soviet writers were cut off from Western literature; but I was not prepared to make the sweeping indictment Brodsky now advances.

The implications of Brodsky's criticism of Soviet writing and the culture that produced it reach beyond a political condemnation of the Soviet Union. They go to the heart of the dilemmas of Western

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literature as a whole—dilemmas that have not been resolved either in theory or in practice.

Essentially, Brodsky is looking at the special history of Russia and its literature from the viewpoint of modernism—and that of the avant garde. What he finds has been banished from Soviet literature, from its nineteenth-century heritage, is the style of esthetic extremism, of going to the very edge of existence—and beyond. "A great writer," says Brodsky,

> is one who elongates the perspective of human sensibility, who shows a man at the end of his wits an opening, a pattern to follow.

As examples of writers in the great modernist tradition, Brodsky cites Mandelstam and Platonov, who has not been translated adequately, and, earlier, Dostoevsky, who has been translated badly. He also places Tsvetaeva completely outside the literary norms, and Solzhenitsyn partially so. In his singling out of Dostoevsky among all the nineteenth-century Russians, Brodsky is not talking only of what is commonly referred to as content. He is invoking the utterly subversive language of Dostoevsky, that creates a new world, replacing the accepted order of thinking and perceiving—an aspect of the overpowering Russian writer whom we can only dimly see in translation. In this respect, Brodsky compares Dostoevsky with Tolstoy, the other fixture in the Western pantheon of Russian literature, both of whom have been so flatly translated by Constance Garnett, that as Brodsky observes, they almost verge into a single writer—Dostoevsky-Tolstoy. However, in contrast to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy represents for Brodsky, whatever genius the novelist may possess in his own right, a foreshadowing of the decline of Russian fiction. For Brodsky sees Tolstoy essentially as a naturalist, and therefore one who was mesmerized by the life he transposed into his art. I always have thought that Dostoevsky was a far more original and intellectually breathtaking writer than Tolstoy, but not knowing the language, I could not document my opinion.

"The sad truth," Brodsky says,

> is that Russian prose has been in a metaphysical slump for quite some time, ever since it produced Tolstoy, who took the idea of art reflecting reality a bit too literally and in whose shadow the subordinate clauses of Russian prose are written indolently until this day.

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". . . this equating art to life," says Brodsky, "is always done at the expense of art." And this, according to Brodsky, is what happened to Russian prose after the Revolution. By hiding behind the naturalist facades and the familiar language available to them, most Soviet novelists, Brodsky maintains, could not break with the official language of the regime that incorporated the ideological messages of its "new-think." They could not escape from the grasp of reality, and, therefore, could not rise above it. Brodsky sums up his estimate of dissident writing thus:

> Aside from Mandelstam and Solzhenitsyn Russian prose for the moment has very little to offer to a man at the end of his wits. There are a few isolated works which in their heartbreaking honesty of eccentricity approximate masterpieces. All they can supply our man with is either a momentary catharsis or comic relief. Though ultimately furthering one's subordination to the status quo, this is one of prose's better services, and it's better if the reading public in this country knows the names of the major dissidents. . . . They constitute a reality with which everybody for whom Russian literature and things Russian are of any consequence will have to reckon.

The interesting question raised by Brodsky's striking analysis of the Russian decline is to what extent it also applies to the literature of the West. Until recently, until, that is, the spirit of modernism seemed to be exhausted in the West, or at least dissolved in the popular appetite for novelty, the opposition between modernist and more conventional writing and between antirealism and realism was generally assumed. Earlier, at the height of the modernist movement, serious writers tended to be advocates of the dissonance, the complexities, the extremism, of modernism, as compared with the adaptation of naturalism to the limitations of a more popular taste—or should I say market. More recently, however, the degeneration and the exploitation of the modernist sensibility by contemporary writers who have managed to be unpopular without being interesting has required us to rethink the purposes of narrative. If we grant that contemporary realism is esthetically cliched, it does not follow that the absence of a clear story is a sign that it is either aesthetically advanced or profound. After all, Pynchon, or Gaddis, for example, are not Kafka, and the efforts by assiduous textual critics to lift their abstruse writing into the pantheon of modernism have succeeded in only making a place

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for them in the academy. Perhaps we are fated in this period to be suspended between the boredom of the failed experimental novel and the banality of the pleasing and easy narrative, embroidered with a few modernist devices. Only a few writers of fiction today seem to fill this space: one thinks, for example, of Bellow, Roth, and Brodkey, who are novelists of ideas and not simply storytellers. Brodsky makes the comparison with the West when he says,

> There must be some lesson for other literatures in the plight of Russian prose in this century, for it's still a bit more forgivable for Russian writers to operate the way they do, with Platonov dead, than for their counterparts in this country to court banalities, with Beckett alive.

The comparison on this level, between the two cultures, is striking. But Beckett's is not a good example of advanced Western writing, for while his novels may be original, they are not very interesting. Only his plays remind one of earlier modernist writers in the reality of their stylized unreality. And Brodsky's citing of Grass, who is a boring novelist, as one of the writers of the West who occupies a decent "middle ground" is also very questionable.

In addition to the main ideas in these essays, there are a number of bold remarks that are worth quoting because they exhibit Brodsky's lack of hesitation in flaunting conventional thinking. For instance:

> In essence, all existing art is already a cliche: precisely because it already exists.

And:

> The tragic achievement of Auden as a poet was precisely that he had dehydrated his verse of any form of deception, be it a rhetorician's or a bardic one. This sort of thing alienated me not only from faculty members, but also from one's fellows in the field, for in every one of us sits that red-pimpled youth thirsting for the incoherence of elevation.

Also, his view of art and democracy:

> At best it will be called subjective or elitist. That would be fair enough except that we should bear in mind that art is not a democratic enterprise, even the art of prose which has an air about it

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> of everybody being able to master it as well as to judge it. The point, however, is that the democratic principle so welcome in nearly all spheres of human endeavor has no application in at least two of them: in art and science. In these two spheres, the application of the democratic principle results in equating masterpieces with garbage and discovery with ignorance.

What makes such observations arresting is not their originality, because some people do hold these views, but the fact that they go against the grain of so much respectable thinking.

One perplexing thing in these essays is the almost obsessive concern with time, which appears as an insistent factor in so many different contexts. I am not sure just what is meant in each case or in general by Brodsky. The closest I can come to understanding it is that anyone with an independent mind growing up in the country where history has taken a bad turn is bound to be preoccupied with history, and, I suppose, with time, which is a powerful metaphor for history. Or, perhaps, time is the linear dimension of space—and geography, with which Brodsky is also fascinated.

I said there were some questionable things in the book. In the elegiac essay on Auden, Brodsky praises him as the greatest mind of the twentieth century. We can understand Brodsky's devotion to Auden, who adopted him when he was still unknown. Auden was, to be sure, an intelligent poet. But given the competition he faced in the matter of intelligence, this hyperbolic tribute goes beyond the call of devotion.

Another thing one questions is a certain preciosity in dealing with the phenomenon of poetry. This comes from an inflation—again to one who is skeptical of any transcendental idea or act that promises salvation—of the role of poetry as a messenger of truth or as a bearer of civilization, itself. But then, for Brodsky the idea of civilization, which is frequently invoked in *Less Than One*, represents everything that has been crushed in the country where he lived and was imprisoned until he was able to leave in 1972. It is all those things that make men human: it is a tradition, a community, a moral idea, a superego. And if poetry sometimes seems for Brodsky to have almost divine powers, it may be that he and his less fortunate countrymen have experienced the divine powers usurped by a power-hungry leadership, of which Brodsky says, "Come to think of it, the party's replacements are the closest thing we have to resurrection."

WILLIAM PHILLIPS

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HEALERS AS KILLERS

THE NAZI DOCTORS: MEDICAL KILLING AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GENOCIDE. By Robert J. Lifton. Basic Books. $19.95.
THE PINK TRIANGLE. THE NAZI WAR AGAINST HOMOSEXUALS. By Richard Plant. Henry Holt and Co. $19.95.

When Bruno Bettelheim introduced Dr. Miklos Nyiszli's *Auschwitz: An Eyewitness Account of Mengele's Famous Death Camp*, in 1960, he stated that we all wish to forget this unbelievable story: it is outside our systems of values and thought. Barely twenty-five years later, the Swiss history teacher Marie Pashoud, the French historians Robert Faurisson and Henri Roques, argue that there never were any gas chambers, or any innocent victims of the Nazis. And some German historians compare "the shattering of the German Reich" by the Soviet army in 1944–45 to "the end of European Jewry," and the Nazis' actions against the Jews to "Bolshevik actions of annihilation." Such views, of course, may be explained as European anti-Semitism, or as serving ultraconservative or ultraleftist interests. But while these fabricated histories may be understood as defensive responses by individuals, or by those "defending" nations that refused to take in more than a trickle of Jews, they contradict the memories of survivors, and defile those of their dead relatives and friends.

Dr. Robert J. Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* and Richard Plant's *The Pink Triangle* are among the most recent additions to what has come to be known as "Holocaust literature," that the "revisionists" will have to ignore. Both authors begin by rooting the Nazi victory of 1933 in the German defeat during the First World War, in its aftermath, and in the politics of the Weimar Republic. But Plant, who documents the fate of homosexuals in concentration camps, devotes much space to the social and political climate in order to trace the beliefs of the Nazis to those of their predecessors, while Dr. Lifton zeroes in on the atrocities at Auschwitz in order to warn us against future disasters.

Both books should silence all the devious and unredeemable anti-Semites—whether of Swiss, French, or German origins—who deny the facts of the Holocaust. But neither these, nor any of the other accounts that tell, remember, trivialize, or "sexualize" the extermination camps, can adequately comprehend how the descendants of Goethe and Schiller, of Kant and Hegel, could set up a machinery that sys-

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tematically would kill up to 20,000 people per day, and would do so "efficiently," and in relative secrecy. True, Dr. Lifton does try to explain. (His book is the more important of the two, and much of what he discusses subsumes what we are told about Plant's victims.) Extrapolating from the memories of a few physicians who supervised the extermination of six million Jews and of three more millions of Poles, Gypsies, and other "undesirables"—among them homosexuals—he coins terms such as the healing-killing paradox and doubling, and he talks of a biomedical vision, of self-realization at Auschwitz, and of a Faustian bargain. Although he demonstrates clearly just how doctors were being turned, or turning themselves, into murderers, he could have done so without this terminology. For after reading over five hundred pages of gruesome testimony and details, we wonder whether we have learned anything we didn't know already. I do not mean to deprecate Dr. Lifton's exacting scholarship. But I do question whether it is indeed even possible to fully understand why the Germans followed Hitler to the point of becoming the executors of his madness.

Dr. Lifton tells us in the first sentence of the foreword that a rabbi friend encouraged him to study the Holocaust in the way he had studied the survivors of Hiroshima, by concentrating on the psychology of the survivor, and that in the course of these inquiries, he began to investigate the psychology of the executioner. Such a shift seems natural for someone interested in the sources of evil—"in order to engage and combat it." Like all intellectuals, he is concerned with the morals of society, but more than most of them, he stresses the moral components of his own intellectual pursuits.

Because Dr. Lifton mined the memories of surviving perpetrators, none of whom seemed to feel much remorse, his book differs from others on the Holocaust. He extrapolates from what he was told, as well as from the records of trials, without dwelling on his respondents' unconscious motives, or analyzing their intrapsychic mechanisms. Staying away from psychoanalytic concepts, and from such Freudian defense mechanisms as splitting or detachment, leads him to talk of "numbing" as facilitating daily life in the death camps, and of "doubling" as "the division of the self into two functioning wholes": this explains how "a part-self could act as an entire self," and how a "killing self," able to avoid guilt feelings, could exist alongside a "normal" ethical self.

Dr. Lifton focusses on "the Nazi doctors who became the lifeblood of Auschwitz," because they lent legitimation to the entire enterprise. They selected who would go to the gas chambers upon arrival

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and who might be able to work in factories; early on they (still) signed death certificates; later on they coerced prisoner doctors to do their dirty work, to "help" them by acting as go-betweens, and to provide lists of names for the next batch to be gassed. They were reversing the Hippocratic oath, were forcing the imprisoned doctors to do so as well, and were taking life instead of preserving it. The Nazi doctors "were neither brilliant nor stupid, neither inherently evil nor particularly ethically sensitive automatons"; they were run-of-the-mill physicians whom ideology had transformed from healers into killers, from therapists into mass murderers. This sobering discovery alone justifies Dr. Lifton's extraordinary labor. But, by elaborating so extensively on the psychological factors, I believe, he underestimates the social and political realities which allowed the death camps to come into existence in the first place—soon after Hitler came to power.

We know that the die was cast when the German government started to implement Hitler's ideas of "racial leadership" and to encode the superiority of the "Aryan race"; and that soon after the Nuremberg Laws were passed in September 1935, to "protect German blood and honor," persons with "defective genes" started to be sterilized. Their "impairments" included "hereditary influences," from blindness, deafness, congenital defects and clubfoot, to harelip and a tendency to promiscuity. From here it was but a small step to induct doctors as "biological soldiers," to consider them the "cultivators of genes," and the "caretakers of the race."

Ultimately, the profession was reorganized in line with Nazi ideology—under the principle of *Gleichschaltung*. Now, doctors acted on the belief that "the Jews were Germany's misfortune"; and they cooperated in eliminating all others they deemed racially inferior. (Some doctors opposed these policies, but they quickly were silenced.) As Dr. Lifton demonstrates, they were taking "life unworthy of life" to save the Fatherland. Experiments on impaired children, and later on adults, led them to advocate euthanasia as mercy killing. Typically, Dr. Lifton notes, "the order to implement the biomedical vision came from the political leadership; it then was conveyed to a leading doctor within the regime, who combined with high-ranking administrators to organize a structure for the project." At first, some psychiatrists, hospital workers, clergymen and relatives of victims whose deaths had come unexpectedly, asked questions. But later, "wild euthanasia," practiced by individual physicians who starved their patients, and who experimented with all sorts of drugs, injections, and diets, no longer brought overt protests. By the time Auschwitz, the "model" of

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extermination camps, became operational, the killing of Jews had been translated into a duty that no longer required justification, and the only questions were about who would be killed immediately, and who would be spared for a while.

Those who have seen the movie *Shoah* need not read this book to recall what a machinery of death the Nazis had set up; and they will recall the importance of Dr. Mengele, the head of the Nazi doctors, who personally oversaw the selection process. Often, he played with the twins on whom he experimented, and fed them chocolates before administering a lethal injection—for the sake of science. His attempts to change eye color in an Aryan direction, for example, by injecting methylene blue into the eyes of brown-eyed blonde children, or to collect and preserve the eyes of his victims, were as cruel as they were scientifically naive. Because Dr. Mengele was able to flip from kindness to women and children to executing them without missing a beat, and without even a twitch of conscience, Dr. Lifton casts him as the prototype of "doubler." Had he not aimed to end up with a psychology of genocide, he might have used "simpler" psychoanalytic language. And he might not have shown such extraordinary patience with Mengele and the other SS doctors, recounting so objectively how they suffered from exertion, fatigue and physical strain at having to perform their duties, how they all drank excessively, either alone or in each others' company—in order to distance themselves from their tasks. He also notes the reactions of respondents to his questions, recounts their increasing malaise, and his own. His discomfort, he tells us, "had to do with uneasiness about a proper moral stance and perhaps also with fear of contagion." Given his medical ethics, he did not push them to answer his questions as relentlessly as Claude Lanzmann had when filming *Shoah*.

According to Dr. Lifton's respondents, they perceived "selection," for instance, as a nonmedical activity, saw themselves as doing their duty, and "sympathized" with the starving children in a Gypsy camp to the point of killing its population all at once. Even the imprisoned doctors, who remembered an occasional kindness by one Nazi doctor or another, stated that "it was impossible for anyone to live in Auschwitz without a sort of emotional anesthesia," and that it took him twenty years to restore his own emotional faculties.

By focussing on the "ecology of Auschwitz," this "structured atrocity-producing situation," Dr. Lifton mentions that inmates had color-coded triangles on their sleeves, to spot Jews (yellow), political prisoners (red), habitual criminals (green), Jehovah's Witnesses

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(purple), emigrants (blue), vagrants (black), and homosexuals (pink), and that the Jews had their designated category superimposed upon whatever other one "applied," to form a star. Richard Plant, who dealt with the pink triangle prisoners alone, found that so-called repeaters and criminals, as well as Jewish homosexuals usually suffered the worst fates among them. All in all, between 5,000 and 15,000 accused homosexuals died in the concentration camps, sometimes on trumped-up charges to get rid of political opponents.

Officially, the war on homosexuals began in June 1935, with the execution of Ernst Roehm, Hitler's early supporter, and leader of his SS brownshirts. His homosexuality was used as a ploy by Heinrich Himmler, in order to insure the unquestioned power of his SS blackshirts. Plant speculates about Himmler's own latent homosexuality, and Lifton mentions that some survivors did so as well. But Nazi racial ideology alone was sufficient to put homosexuals on the list of expendables. Already before the passage of the Nuremberg laws, the SS magazine *Das Schwarze Korps* demanded the death penalty for homosexual men—and by 1941 any SS or police officer "engaging in indecent behavior with another man" could be condemned to death. "Racially inferior" homosexuals, of course, did not even get a trial, and were completely at the mercy of homosexual guards.

Hitler's fantasy of an Aryan superrace was enacted by doctors, and by bureaucrats who believed that the "danger of infection by Jewish blood," or by homosexuality, justified "eradicating the sources of disease." Therefore, Dr. Lifton explains genocide, also, as a response to "collective fear of pollution and defilement." Since purification rituals, as Mary Douglas has noted, may combat defilement, Dr. Lifton could argue that the "Nazi doctors became the professional (and biological) purifiers, once they themselves had undergone purification." This parallel then allows him to generalize to the psychology of genocide he set out to construct. By putting the Holocaust into this larger context, he could bury its specificity, and could compare it to the Turkish massacres of Armenians in 1915, the distancing of American fighter pilots in Vietnam from their victims on the ground, and the genocides in Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Nigeria. Thereby, he diminishes its significance. Though these genocides were horrible in their own fashion, only the Nazis invented a bureaucratic killing machinery—a machinery that would have found new categories of victims, had Germany not lost the war. Furthermore, to none of the other situations, except to the Russian Gulag, could Dr. Lifton's own notion of a "killing ecology" be applied.

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By assuming that one genocide is just as good as any other Dr. Lifton can conclude that "no individual self is inherently evil, murderous, genocidal," that "numbing can lead to amoral self-process," and that "Germans have no monopoly on evil self-processes." He may well be correct. But by emphasizing the similarity of (fairly superficial) psychological processes which were activated in *all* the inhabitants of the death camps, Dr. Lifton underplays the differences between intrapsychic mechanisms of fearful and terrorized victims, and those of omnipotent and powerful executioners. And he minimizes the unmitigated power of the Nazis' political machinery, whose power over these doctors he so excellently documents.

In the end, Richard Plant's book is a courageous effort exposing prejudice against both Jews and homosexuals: he escaped from Frankfurt before the round-ups, and felt he had to bear witness. Dr. Lifton's much more substantive book, I think, is marred by being bent to its author's pacifist aims. By focussing on a psychology of genocide, rather than on its politics, or on the sheer terror under which everyone existed, he believes he can use the Nazi doctors as lessons in order to caution us against nuclear disaster. Had he limited himself to his subject alone, I would have nothing but praise for his inordinate efforts. As it is, I must fault him for having employed the Holocaust to further his own political views.

EDITH KURZWEIL

THE INTERPRETATION OF FREUD

FREUD: AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS LIFE AND WORKS. By J. N. Isbister. Polity Press/Basil Blackwell, Inc. $8.95.

In recent years there has been a steady increment of writings about Freud and psychoanalysis from a far-flung assortment of institutional and/or intellectual outposts. The latest addition to what has become an intellectual industry is J. N. Isbister's sizeable and handsomely fashioned book, which is to be greeted therefore as part of the normal flow of cultural reproduction, as a new generation of students comes forward to be introduced to a complex figure and subject through the focus created by a selective reading of the latest generation of scholarly research and interpretation. Unfortunately,

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Isbister has used certain recent biographical findings and speculations about Freud without sufficient discrimination, and, even less fortunately, his acquaintance with the corpus of Freud's work and with collateral material is still further inadequate.

Despite these flaws, Isbister's book is worth examining because of its ambitious scope and because in some ways it is representative of current trends. I cannot recall a work of similar intellectual ambitions that contains as many plain errors of fact, ordinary detail and even literacy as Isbister's. Early on, for instance, Isbister refers to Freud's father as having lived in "Galicia, a town now part of Poland." This bit of creative geography will amuse many Spaniards and a smaller number of Litvaks, but it is a representative illustration of what new and inquiring readers can expect. Along similar lines, Isbister refers several times to Freud's contemporary and the alleged discoverer of the site of Troy as Heinrich "Schliermann." For an account of the Melanie Klein/Anna Freud controversy in England, he refers to an article by an analyst he calls Melitta "Schideberg," failing both to get the name right and to identify the special place in the controversy occupied by the misnamed person. This chronic incapacity to get simple things straight shows up again when Isbister describes Ernst Kris as "the historian of psychoanalysis." At an equally elementary level of failed literacy, we find Isbister referring to Freud as enduring "the throws of his 'self-analysis'"—thinking of him no doubt as some kind of psychic Hulk Hogan. Infantile sexuality is referred to as "indifferentiated"; in the specimen dream of "Irma's injection" we read about the "rubinal bones" of the nose; and he quotes Freud as saying that Dora suffered from "gastalgias"—the first time, I believe, that it has been so overtly suggested that Dora's cramps were also hot air. And Isbister's apparatus of footnote references is so ridden with errors, lacunae, absurdities and incoherences as to defy brief—or perhaps even protracted—description.

None of these failings in fundamental detail would be worth considering were it not for the particular ambition that Isbister declares himself as pursuing. His book, he writes, aims to understand Freud's works and ideas "within their proper biographical and intellectual context." He intends to provide the reader with a "brief account" of Freud's life; alongside of and woven into that narrative, he will sketch out "the details of the evolution of his ideas pointing out some of their origins and some of the transformations Freud wrought on them"; finally he will "assess those ideas, in relation to his life, and our contemporary understanding of men, and in the light of . . .

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wider philosophical or religious questions." In other words, Isbister's work purports to further our understanding of Freud by means of contextual analysis. What this claim implies as a rule is that historical, biographical, and autobiographical sources of information and habits of discussion will be brought to bear on the analysis of certain ideas or tendencies of thought. What it additionally means today is that a group of rapidly changing disciplines of study—new refinements in historical research (particularly research in intellectual history) revived practical and renewed theoretical interests in the exploration of biography and autobiography—will all be marshalled in the efforts of understanding, interpretation and analysis. The contextual examination of cultural or literary artifacts is closely allied to hermeneutical analysis. What both aim for is the construction of a network of preconditions and influences that will amount to a more complex and mediated sense of causality than the monolinear historical-biographical determinism of the past. Just as Freud's idea of the "overdetermination" (and in its later reformulation as the "multiple function") of psychic phenomena was an immense improvement on the notion of one-mental-occurrence-one-cause that it replaced, so the current notion of contextual understanding aims to supply us with a more elaborated and ramified sense of what is at issue in the investigation of how important ideas come into being, find their meaning and affect the world.

But this meritorious ambition comes to nothing for several reasons. First, Isbister's own grasp of intellectual issues is exceptionally fragile. At the beginning of the Introduction, for example, we learn that "Freud stressed the negative aspects of humanity" and yielded to "nihilism." It seems highly likely that Isbister does not know what the idea of nihilism means. And his handling of contextual-biographical material is of such a nature as to inspire anything but confidence. He asserts that Jacob Freud's lack of prosperity, his "inability to provide adequately for his family may well have contributed to Freud's hatred for his father which was to provide a key to Freud's whole psychological system." Along similar lines, and relying quite without critical discrimination upon the writings of Peter Swales, he affirms that "the link between cocaine and sexuality may be one of the keys to understanding the development of psychoanalysis with its stress on the power of sex." Passages such as these prompt one to suspect that biographical material is being brought forward not in the service of fuller understanding, or as an additional source of explanatory value, but to convert or displace ideas into motives

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and hence to discredit them. In point of fact, Isbister's deployment of contextual analysis resembles nothing so much as old-fashioned intellectual biography, whose use of context was as often as not in the service of reductionism. Hence we find virtually untold numbers of assertions such as: "Psychoanalysis was for Freud a means whereby he could vicariously enjoy sexual gratification with women." Whatever particle of truth may be contained within such an uninflected charge is nullified by the motivated purpose which its very formulation transparently reveals. But Isbister does not stop at discreditation through reduction. His discussion of the recently published material about Sabina Spielrein contains the following sentences: "She became one of the first patients Jung tried to treat with psychoanalysis. As a result it is most probable that she and Jung became lovers." If we leave to one side the goofy logic that is conveyed in that "as a result," we can see that such statements are really little different from the old kind of slander and scandal-mongering that used in the past to be substituted for arguments against psychoanalysis, as is Isbister's reiterated insistence that Freud was consciously concerned "to systematically hide and distort" the "personal and intellectual context" of his ideas "in order to further the vision of himself as the psychoanalytic hero bringing the tablets of new science to an ignorant, recalcitrant public." Never was the old chestnut that a really good libel must contain at least a grain of truth more aptly illustrated.

By now it should be evident that Isbister's work is involved in a thoroughgoing deep and radical contradiction. On the one hand, he is bent upon demonstrating that Freud was throughout an unwavering and rather simple-minded nineteenth-century determinist. "In the depths of the experiences of childhood," he characteristically writes, "future behavior was thus being forged—Freud's theory was strongly deterministic." One wonders what the obverse form of this statement might look like. In another place he asserts that Freud's conclusions are only "warrantable if one accepts the notion that mental life is a product of, or has at its source, infantile desires and wishes." Mental life? All of it? Most? Parts? What parts? Does it matter? This kind of absolutization represents the defeat of thought itself, not to speak of seriousness and complexity, as does Isbister's repeated insistence on the falsehold of the "analytic assumption that adult behavior is *causally* determined by . . . early life events." On the other hand, he is concerned with demonstrating with conclusive authority the biographical and intellectual causes that determined Freud's own life and thought. Hence causality in the hands of Freud

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is reductionistic and deterministic, while causality used to explain away, refute, and debunk Freud is intelligent and up-to-date contextualization. This heads-I-win-tails-you-lose habit of argument and exposition characterizes Isbister's book as a whole and makes for depressingly unsavory reading.

Such unsavoriness brings one back to the extraordinary number of literal errors of spelling and in specifications of detail that are so remarkable an attribute of this book. In an odd way such wholesale and repeated errors remind one of slips of the tongue and other parapraxes, as does the circumstance that Isbister seems entirely unconscious of the unmistakable and gaping contradiction of his central argument—both seem as if designed indirectly to express and unsuccessfully to conceal an animus that in more overt form would be an embarrassment. Yet Isbister's book is also in part a collaborative production: it had to pass through the hands of friends, publisher's readers, editors, copy and proofreaders and others before it reached its present, final disfigured form.

At the risk of intellectual irresponsibility, I should like to suggest that this phenomenon is at least in part symptomatic of the state of psychoanalysis in Great Britain. Two of Freud's chief biographers have come from there; the psychoanalytic movement in England is small but vigorous, and in the object-relations school of analysts, who descend from Melanie Klein, Britain has produced what is probably the most useful and innovative body of advancements in Freudian theory in the last several decades. And yet in no important society in the Western world has Freud or psychoanalytic theory had less of a pervasive impact or influence; in no industrialized Western culture—whether we choose to examine the mass media or entertainment industry, child-rearing and education or advanced elite intellectual circles—have Freud and psychoanalysis counted for less; no other contemporary culture has proved so impervious to those insights which have been internalized to such effect elsewhere in the world. In a sense, the puzzle that Virginia Woolf, whose husband's Hogarth Press had become Freud's chief publisher in English, never in all the years of her dire mental distress seems to have consulted a psychoanalyst remains as perplexingly salient to British culture at large today as it did fifty years ago.

Two of Isbister's chief explicit objections to Freud may be regarded as representative of British cultural bugaboos. First, he considers Freud from beginning to end to be a firm and unwavering positivist, without doubts, qualifications, or complications. That

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Freud believed in science is self-evidently true; he was trained in the nineteenth-century traditions of physical and medical theories, assumptions and practices. But that he also inherited the great German tradition of philosophical thinking that comes down from Kant is true as well. In this tradition human beings are entirely naturalized—and hence the appropriate subjects for scientific scrutiny and explanation—and nevertheless at the same time remain active, willing agents whose subjective, choosing and deciding existence is also not to be denied or left out of account. Such a complex, difficult, uncomfortable and indeed astigmatic vision—as Ernest Gellner, no friend of psychoanalysis, incidentally, has called it—is altogether characteristic of Freud's thinking, and Isbister is, of course, altogether oblivious to it. This astigmatic vision is, as I have suggested earlier, inseparable from the intellectual plight, dilemma, or condition of psychoanalysis—it is at once a medical subspecialty and a cultural science or interpretative discipline.

Isbister's second critical contention comes in two parts, and is in some way a consequence of the first. He believes that "modern man is no less religious than his medieval counterpart." In the place of the Church, however, we have substituted science, or the state, or, as with Freud, sexuality. Indeed, Freud is charged with nothing less than the "idolization of sex." This is an ancient accusation, as is its corollary that psychoanalysis is a substitute or secular religion. Whatever element of truth there may be in such assertions is submerged by the broadsided vulgarity in which they are phrased. For Isbister does not accuse Freud of whoring after the false gods of science and sexuality in order to make room for some new and even more skeptical or naturalistic vision that we can today adhere to. What he wants to argue, no less, is that although "it is patently obvious that our understanding of God as a father is colored by our experiences of our human fathers, it by no means follows . . . that God does not exist or that he cannot be known except in our relations to our understanding of human fatherhood." In short, traditional religious belief is as reasonable and satisfactory a response to the complexities and mysteries of human experience as science, psychoanalysis, modern philosophy, literature, or anything else that humanity has struggled to come up with to shore against its ruins in the last two hundred years. This allegedly commonsensical "refutation" of Freud in the name of traditional affirmations and assurances is almost as old as psychoanalysis itself and, as it has been demonstrated

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on endless occasions, is founded on a grotesque misunderstanding of the whole of modern intellectual and cultural history.

Yet before we dismiss this dreadful performance into the oblivion that it has amply earned, we should observe that such extended polemical projects are in some measure a kind of proof of the vitality of the cultural phenomena they are trying to malign and that they wish would go away. But they are, in addition, as much evidence of the residual vitality of the older cultural institutions they are defending, and of the more important nonresidual needs those institutions served, and suggest that those needs have by no means subsided into desuetude. As W. H. Auden wrote on the occasion of Freud's death, Freud has become part of the historical weather, the intellectual air we breathe and climate we occupy. It is worth remarking, nonetheless, that the cultural weather system, like the natural systems of which it is a metaphor, remains more complex than we can supply a convincing account of, and that our abilities to make predictions about its future from its current state also remain approximately as restricted as those of our local meteorologists. Isbister's deplorably bad book serves as a timely reminder that whether you are a weatherman or not, there's no way of telling which way the cultural winds are going to blow.

STEVEN MARCUS

PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

SELECTED POEMS. By John Ashbery. Viking Press. $22.95.
COLLECTED POEMS: 1928–1985. By Stephen Spender. Random House. $19.95.
COLLECTED POEMS. 1948–1984. By Derek Walcott. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. $25.00.

In *Selected Poems* of John Ashbery, *Collected Poems: 1928–1985* of Stephen Spender, and *Collected Poems: 1948–1984* of Derek Walcott, the past year has enshrined three landmarks. Each poet celebrated can honorably claim to have reached a major way station of his pilgrimage. Though accidental, the triumvirate pattern is significant: each of the three exemplifies a distinct attitude toward

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language as referential medium, and in configuration they chart the compelling pathways in the Garden of today's poetry.

For Stephen Spender, no Fall has occurred. Language adheres earnestly to meaning, and without qualm assumes its right, indeed, responsibility, to discourse upon the role of the self in history. Such discourse implies and perhaps creates an equally confident audience. Poem after poem concludes in forthright, humane, and decent declaration, sealed in rhyme and meter: "And their mutual terrors heal/ Within our love's deep miracle."

John Ashbery may be said to be our poet of the Fall *par excellence*. "Why not examine the distance?" he asks in "Clepsydra": "It seemed he had been repeating the same stupid phrase/ Over and over throughout his life . . ." As indeed he has. From the earliest poems, he has been negotiating the distance between the word and its reference, poetry itself occupying the hazardous intermediate space: "Arranging by chance// To meet as far this morning/ From the world as agreeing/ With it . . ." ("Some Trees"). Ashbery celebrates a Paradise Lost of fallen language in its amazement, peril and solitude: "Each moment/ Of utterance is the true one; likewise none are true . . ." ("Clepsydra"). "Dear, be the tree your sleep awaits;/ Worms be your words, you are not safe from ours." ("Sonnet").

Seeing, and seeing past, the "postmodern" anxiety of reference, Derek Walcott wrests an incarnational faith from the very teeth of loss. His is a new Eden in which world and text cohere again, if only provisionally, in each unfolded metaphor: "Verandahs, where the pages of the sea/ are a book left open by an absent master . . ." ("Another Life"); "And the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough/ from whose ground-swell the great hexameters come . . ." ("Sea Grapes"). Over and over he re-enacts the primal creation of language, as in "Greece," unfortunately excluded from *Collected Poems*: ". . . Now, crouched before blank stone,/ I wrote the sound for 'sea', the sign for 'sun'." Most radically, and most willfully, he charges Western typography with ideogrammatic virtue, as in "To Return to the Trees" where "senex" winks at us "with its two eyes," or in *Another Life* where the moon literally rises at the end of a line: "a moon ballooned up from the Wireless Station. O/ mirror . . ."

Of the three poets, Spender has lived longest, and has mapped out his pilgrimage with most conscious care, extensively rewriting well-known poems, uprooting others, to present a slim and tended volume. There is a fine consistency in the corrections. They register

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a general cooling of temperature in the last half-century of English poetry: Spender has dropped Time and Spirit to lower case, has toned down the mythological so that "Icarus" becomes "Airman," and has improved fluidity by sweeping away much punctuation as well as by dropping lines and stanzas. He has adjusted his lens by adjusting his articles: in "His face/ Is this hanging mask transfigured" from "Beethoven's Death Mask," "this" rightly replaces the vaguer "the"; in "Polar Exploration" "the" gives way to "our" in the interests of precision and rhythmical authority: "Summer struck/ Water over rocks, and half our world . . ." Most significantly, he has recharged his verbs. In "Polar Exploration," "And icebergs with their little birds" becomes "And icebergs run across by little birds"; in "Van der Lubbe," "Contempt of Justice, delight of mere guns" gains vigor as "The twisting of justice, the stuttering of guns."

These are not small matters. They show with what attentiveness Spender has combed through his *oeuvre*, how responsive he has been to poetic climate. The career thus presented follows a clear line of development from the early ornate syntax of "Airman" ("Nor on those eagles that so fear him, nor/ Will strain his brow") to the diary poems of the seventies: "Dined with Auden. He'd been at Milwaukee/ Three days. . ."

The essential poet, however, is revealed in his continuities. Whereas Ashbery and Walcott write from the periphery, Spender has always sat squarely ensconced in the mansion of English Poetry in what might be called the "traditional modern" room. He has thought "continually of those who are truly great," and has drawn from this central position both strength and weakness. At his best, he writes an expressively pressured pentameter in which Hardy's touch may be felt: "That you, who nothing else saw, would see this" ("Acts Passed Beyond"); his talent lends itself as well to textured lines in which the material play of vowels and consonants fleshes out abstraction: "This aristocrat, superb of all instinct . . ." ("Airman").

When the pulse beats less heatedly, the poems pale in declamation. "The Uncreating Chaos" barely survives its well-intentioned conclusion: "Meanwhile, where nothing is sacred/ And love no longer willed/ Nor our true purpose conscious,/ Holy is lucidity/ And the mind that dare explain." Perhaps in the service of that lucidity, the poet/editor has left untouched a certain number of redundant or overinsistent lines, as when Auden's poems, visible in his face "Like letters carved in a tree's bark," are unnecessarily interpreted as "The sight and sound of solitudes endured" ("Auden's Fu-

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neral"). Nor has he cleared away all conventional stage props: charmed moon, fire and blossoms, jewels and golden sex, untamed horses of the blood, swan white still bedevil the revised versions.

Language implies community, that communion with the dead known as tradition as well as membership in more or less imaginary republics of the living. Spender, who in one poem wryly styles himself "the public son of a public man," has always written poetry "public" in the sense that it engages openly in the political discourse of the day. Especially in the thirties, his verse seems pressured by responsibilities less aesthetic than ethical and social: it asserts an ideological community documenting—with, at times, rare acuteness—the Spanish Civil War and the "twittering voices/ Of children crawling on their knees/ At foot of the most crowded pages/ Of Blue Books, histories . . ." ("A Footnote, from Marx's chapter in *Das Capital*, 'The Working Day'").

Expecting, as he says, ". . . always/ Some brightness to hold in trust/ Some final innocence," Spender has written hortatory poetry as unabashed as any in the century, inciting "oh young men, oh young comrades" and "governor, inspector, visitor" to action. These poems present no linguistic challenge, and survive as period documents. He derives subtler inspiration from the more intimate community of friendship and family. Describing the breakup of marriage, the deaths of sister-in-law and a friend, guilt towards the father, a new marriage, son and daughter, Spender as diarist comes into his own in verse of affecting simplicity and keenness. Auden at Oxford told him that he would be a poet because he was "so infinitely capable of being humiliated." Probing humiliation as well as joy, Spender has made of himself a poet we must remember: "Or it might be that friend once/ I shut outside/ Sink or swim—well, he sank—/ In my sleep cried// 'Let me in! Let me in!'/ Tapping at the pane./ Him I imagine./ Twenty years in the rain." ("Sleepless").

In "Tapestry" Ashbery examines an Eden of innocent communication: "But in some other life, which the blanket depicts anyway,/ The citizens hold sweet commerce with one another/ And pinch the fruit unpestered, as they will . . ." Given his premises, that the tapestry (art, language) stands in oblique relation to "reality" ("For it must always be frontal and yet to one side"), and that perception itself falsifies ("Draws an outline, or a blueprint/ Of what was just there: dead on the line"), such an Eden can only be considered a nostalgia. Neither language nor consciousness, multiple and eroding in time, substantiate it, "As words go crying after themselves, leaving

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the dream/ Upended in a puddle somewhere/ As though 'dead' were just another adjective." This poem indicates something of the complexity of Ashbery's enterprise, the more than thirty years of testing the cobwebs which link word to unspeakable reality. It indicates also the poignancy of the task, since death does lie beneath utterance, giving it both the lie and the truth: it inhabits the blank spaces between stanzas, the monstrously indefinite pronouns of *A Wave*.

Selected Poems in no way purports to present a whole *oeuvre*. It catches the poet in mid-flight; while its exclusions may facilitate access for new readers by clearing away tedious and overwritten passages, it omits crucial poems from nearly all the volumes, most noteworthily from *The Double Dream of Spring* which is a beautiful entity, from *Three Poems*, and from *As We Know*. It does grant the occasion, however, to take stock.

The remarkable book *Some Trees*, which appeared in 1956 subsuming much of the earlier *Turandot and Other Poems*, established Ashbery's essential features. Its first poem, "Two Scenes," opened with a militant claim to vision: "We see us as we truly behave:/ From every corner comes a distinctive offering." If the declaration was Romantic, its accepted banality of phrase and surrealist juxtapositions were distinctly anti-Sublime: "For long we hadn't heard so much news, such noise./ The day was warm and pleasant./ . . . We see you in the tips of your hair,/ Air resting around the tips of mountains." Its syntactic, semantic, and narrative derangements announce the Ashbery to come, a poet whose prophecy lies behind the veil of Isis: "In the evening/ Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is."

If *Some Trees* was something of a manifesto of subversion, it also showed a poet tactfully engaged with his tradition. In the poem "Some Trees," a beguiling syntax twines through rhyming tetrameter quatrains as it explores the distance *joining* imagination and world: "And glad not to have invented/ Such comeliness, we are surrounded:/ A silence already filled with noises,/ A canvas on which emerges// A chorus of smiles, a winter morning./ Placed in a puzzling light, and moving,/ Our days put on such reticence/ These accents seem their own defense." Other poems from the same volume accept those conditions of polysemy and mystery with equal chastity: "And only in the light of lost words/ Can we imagine our rewards." ("Picture of little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers").

But, Ashbery declares elsewhere, "Much that is beautiful must be discarded/ So that we may resemble a taller// version of ourselves . . ." From book to book he disrupts his poise and performs more and

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more breathtaking feats of equilibrium as he catches consciousness in its own act: "The performance is worth knives." ("The Ascetic Sensualists," *The Tennis Court Oath*). A review can give the merest sketch of so prolonged a quest romance. Yet that it must be so considered, the poems themselves leave no doubt, presenting themselves as so many stages of pilgrimage: "It is the blankness that succeeds gaiety, and Everyman must depart/ Out there into stranded night . . ." ("The Task").

Plotting that pilgrimage has been the delight of critics because Ashbery has been so teasingly metacritical, challenging even as he acknowledges his masters: "And one is left sitting in the yard/ To try to write poetry/ Using what Wyatt and Surrey left around . . ." ("Grand Galop"), "So I cradle this average violin that knows/ Only forgotten showtunes, but argues/ The possibility of free declamation anchored/ To a dull refrain . . . / Our question of a place of origin hangs/ Like smoke: how we picnicked in pine forests,/In coves with the water always seeping up, and left/ Our trash, sperm and excrement everywhere, smeared/ On the landscape, to make of us what we could." ("Street Musicians"). Inviting to critics as Ashbery can be in his epistemological and lit/crit ruminations, he finally slips away into figure and music, eluding the academy: the vision is sensual, illogical, and mortal, drenched in subjective time.

It is also intensely private, concerned with the poem-as-action simulating consciousness: "No,// We aren't meaning that anymore . . ." "Its flexing is its account" ("On the Towpath"). These flexings take many forms: prose poems and eight and nine stress lines whose Jamesian syntax seems designed to ward off death, couplets and quatrains of stunning curtness. The human loves suggested by the shifting pronouns stand, finally, for a love story of language which weeps at its own estrangement from its object; the "selves" constituted are delivered into a state of transparency 'Until no part/ Remains that is surely you" ("Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror").

Such privacy appears a far cry from Spender's public poetry: it might seem, at times, as though Ashbery's enterprise were "purely" linguistic. Yet this *oeuvre*, evasive as it is, has its place in the *polis*. It takes as its medium language at its most polluted and betrayed, the landscape of cant, jargon, jingles, and clichés which we, as citizens, share: "We hold these truths to be self-evident:/ That ostracism, both political and moral, has/ Its place in the twentieth century scheme of things . . ." ("Decoy"). It is the landscape Emerson describes in *Nature*: "The corruption of man is followed by the cor-

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ruption of language. . .; a paper currency is employed when there is no bullion in the vaults." Within this debased economy, Ashbery as poet/guerilla engages in oblique tactics to dislodge a nontranscendent salvation which can be shared: language redeemed, finally, as both vision and communal bond. "You have returned not to the supernatural glow of heaven but to the ordinary daylight. . . . The person sitting opposite you who asked you a question is still waiting for an answer; he had not yet found your hesitation unusual, but it is up to you to grasp it with both hands, wrenching it from the web of connectives to rub off the grime that has obscured its brilliance so as to restore it to him . . ." (*Three Poems*).

Spender and Ashbery, in their different ways, are lyric and elegiac poets; Walcott reaches into the tragic. It is not simply that dramatic force leaks from his verse plays into the poems. Born in St. Lucia, Walcott received division as his colonial inheritance, with one black and one white grandfather, two languages, two imaginative worlds struggling for expression within him. His poems do not discuss or recount history; history throbs physically and fatally through them, the name of the English grandfather, who burned to death, searing the poet's skin like a hair shirt, the colonial schoolboy pinning a Flanders poppy to his blazer: "It bled like a vowel." (*Midsummer LII*). Politics and language are welded together. For Walcott, who "had entered the house of literature as a houseboy," writing in English is a wresting of power and selfhood from the hands of enslavers. "I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me/ and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation," proclaims Shabine, the sailor/ poet of "The Schooner Flight," the same who remarks, "A spit like that worth any number of words./But that's all them bastards have left us: words."

In the early work Walcott announces his scheme of repossession: "Between the Greek and African pantheon,/Lost animist, I rechristened trees." Already these poems shudder with the force of metaphor, liberating metamorphoses of the given world: "The flowering breaker detonates its surf./White bees hiss in the coral skull." ("Origins"). But this poem slips the banished dialect in only surreptitiously amidst its gorgeous decorum: "Pommes de Cythère, bitter Cytherean apple." In general, the early work enacts possession by flaunting mastery of paternal voices—Dylan Thomas, Eliot, Yeats, Marvell—and oscillates somewhat uneasily between such demonstrations and dialect poems. But in "Tales of the Islands," a prototype of the autobiographical epic *Another Life*, the voice binds divided realms within a radiant and lyric factuality. Increasingly,

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Walcott's will be a music of *things*, Monet-like splendor and formal rigor, modulated by the sustained fiction of a unifying "I": "The marl white road, the Dorée rushing cool/Through gorges of green cedars, like the sound/Of infant voices from the Mission School,/Like leaves like dim seas in the mind; *ici*, Choiseul/. . ."

Whether exploring his adopted "exile" in the United States or his inherited colonial fracture, Walcott continually fingers distance. Often it is distance between languages colliding and marrying: "Moi c'est gens Sainte Lucie./C'est là moi sorti;/Is there that I born." ("Sainte Lucie"). But such confrontations stand for cultures, for worlds, and in theme as well Walcott measures his estrangements: "The classics can console. But not enough." ("Sea Grapes"). Finally, that alienation is seen as belonging not to the peculiar accident of colonial *déracinement*, but to the very condition of modernity.

How then, these poems worry, can myth live, since the traditional gods come to us "dead on arrival" ("From This Far")? It is in orchestrating his answer that Walcott displays his full daring. Accepting skepticism, (". . . you see/through all that moonshine what they really were,/these gods as seed-bulls, gods as rutting swans—/an overheated farmhand's literature"), he rediscovers myth in the conscious act of the imagination. After its deliberately debunking puns, "Europe" concludes:

> Nothing is there, just as it always was,
> but the foam's wedge to the horizon-light,
> then, wire-thin, the studded armature,
> like drops still quivering on his matted hide,
> the hooves and horn-points anagrammed in stars.

Metaphor and simile, linguistic acts, return the world to us in a freshness apparently beyond language and inherited myth: the figure standing in the door-light is ". . . not Nike loosening her sandals,/ but a girl slapping sand from her foot, one hand on the frame." (*Midsummer XXV*). Walcott sustains the illusion—for that is what it is, art's true lie—by a language of extreme physicality: "the vowels curl from the tongue of the carpenter's plane" (*Another Life*). The collusion of world and word is frankly erotic: "now, lecherous, lecherous, sighed the insucked water . . ." (*Another Life*). He sustains it also by dramatic voice, whether of the poet/father/lover/husband personae or of alter-egos like Shabine and Spoiler: ". . . all you go bawl out, 'Spoil, things ain't so bad.'/This ain't the Dark Age, is just Trinidad,/is human

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nature, Spoiler, after all,/it ain't big genocide, is just bohbohl . . ." ("The Spoiler's Return"). Finally, it is in welcoming dialect into their schooled and masterful prosody that the poems take on the appearance of a sumptuous plenitude exceeding literature, of presence conjured beyond sign systems.

"The midsummer sea, the hot pitch road, this grass, these shacks that made me," Walcott writes in the final poem of *Midsummer.* That landscape and its politics are indeed his engendering forces. Many poems resound with rage at the "borrowed white" of the imposed culture, and others, like "The Spoiler's Return," spit with Swiftian invective at Caribbean scandal. The central drama, however, is inward, that of a man composing himself; the dominant mood is one of charity, the dominant action, *poesis.* The poems chart the mind's flickering between world and text, its reflection upon its own activity. Early on, in "The Flock," "I travel through such silence, making dark/symbols with this pen's point across snow." Later, *Midsummer* measures its own vigor: "Midsummer bursts/out of its body, and its poems come unwarranted . . ."

This last book shows verse in magnificent stride, tensile enough to keep pace with apostrophe, description, rumination, narrative, dialogue, quotation, epistle. The voice has gained near perfect pitch, and its words resemble those of the mythical Assyrians living next door ". . . in a hot dark room, muttering a language whose sound/ had winged lions in it, and birds cut into a wall." (*Midsummer* LIII).

ROSANNA WARREN

ON THE LAM

FEMINISM ON TRIAL: THE GINNY FOAT CASE AND ITS MEANING FOR THE FUTURE OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT. By Ellen Hawkes. William Morrow and Co. $18.45.

Back in the midseventies Clancy Sigal and I wrote a *serie noir* detective spoof. While we were inventing our narrative Clancy asked me: if a woman had committed a murder and wished to hide out, start a new life under a new name, how would she go about it? I suggested that she go to a booming new Southern city like Atlanta, join the local chapter of NOW, enlist the feminists' help, telling

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them she had to use an assumed name because her husband was a wife-beater and she was on the lam from him. Clancy thought a man might do well to join a chapter of AA in a medium New York suburb like Mount Vernon. Although our *homage* to Dashiel Hammett never got published, it occurred to me after reading Ellen Hawkes's gritty account of Ginny Foat—of mobile, violent America from the sixties through the eighties and the new breed of California fast-track feminists—that my Atlanta notion wasn't too far off the mark. Ginny Foat's own saga, as described by Hawkes, is true Ida Lupino with a soupçon Mildred Pierce and Jessica Lange doing the paler remake. Hawkes recounts the story of a woman who essentially hid her past by using the feminist movement to invent a new self.

But Ginny Foat could no longer totally conceal that past after her second husband, Jack Sidote, in 1977, confessed to Nevada police two 1965 robbery murders. He alleged that his exwife (then known as Virginia Galluzo) lured an Argentinian businessman, Moises Chayo, from the bar in Bourbon Street where she worked as a go-go girl and Sidote worked as a barman, into their car and bludgeoned him. The couple fled to Nevada where (according to Sidote) Ginny Foat found another victim in a Reno casino whom she also killed. In 1977 in a Nevada court Sidote plea-bargained: his sentence was lightened in exchange for his testimony against his exwife. Later, he reneged, and refused to testify against her. Foat, who had been under arrest in Nevada, then returned to Los Angeles and her third husband—a caterer, Raymond Foat, and her new career as president of California NOW. Though the Louisiana courts seemed remarkably indolent about the Chayo Bourbon Street murder, eventually they caught up with Ginny Foat in California. The Los Angeles police knew of her not because she was a prominent leader of NOW, but because in 1969 she had been with a small-time hood, Richard Busconi, when he got pumped full of bullets in front of a San Pedro bar. Foat had been called by the police as a witness in their investigation of the Busconi murder. Ginny Foat's past had been *varied.*

During Foat's unsuccessful attempt in 1983 to fight extradition to Louisiana for what later turned into her sensational trial for the Chayo Bourbon Street murder, her NOW spokeswoman, Jan Holden, primly told the press: "We want to stress who she is *today*, not who she was before."

But it is, precisely, the rise of Ginny Foat that is so fascinating. She met husband number three, (after him there was a fourth, eight-

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month marriage to a Californian businessman, Jack Meyer) Raymond Foat, an Englishman, while working as a waitress in a floating San Pedro restaurant, *Princess Louise.* For a while they ran a catering place near Disneyland. Then, in 1974, Ginny Foat drifted away from Foat and joined with an old pal, Danny Macheano, to start a new catering business: "Affairs Unlimited." Her first step into the middle class was in Anaheim, in Orange County. There, she joined a group of businesswomen: the Soroptimists. And from there, it was just a quick hop to California NOW. Her marriage with Raymond Foat had gotten her a big suburban house, with a jacuzzi, a pool and a sunken living room. NOW members recall liking the place for their spaghetti dinner meetings. With your own jacuzzi who cares about the past, about having to face a court trial for a remote, murky murder?

Ellen Hawkes belongs to a second generation of women feminist writers who now are questioning the values and goals of the feminists of the early 1970s. In *A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women's Liberation in America* (William Morrow and Co.), Sylvia Ann Hewlett, the economist, points out that women's liberation is just another American myth; she concludes that women would have been much better off to have devoted their energies to basic social reforms which would have obtained for them the social protections that are taken for granted in England and most of Western Europe. Leonore Weitzman's *The Divorce Revolution: The Unexpected Social and Economic Consequences for Women and Children in America* (The Free Press), has been a milestone document in proving that the no-fault divorce has actually impoverished women and children. Also notable is *Women and Children Last. The Plight of Poor Women in Affluent America* (Viking Press) by Ruth Sidel.

Hawkes's main question in *Feminism on Trial* is: what is the nature of NOW that a woman so extraordinarily lacking in ordinary credentials—either moral or educational—was able, with so little effort, to become president of the California chapter. She depicts Foat as having a chameleonic, almost psychopathic personality—she apparently was able to instantly mimic the look and attitudes of whatever social group she found herself in. Thus, when it occurred to her that the feminists were the next step up, she noticed these women weren't wearing her sort of polyester clothes; she bought a new wardrobe and read three feminist classics. My one quibble with Hawkes is that she has shaped her book like a novel. Precisely because she gives

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such a devastating picture of the California NOW, I would like to know whom Hawkes is quoting in her portrait of behind-the-scenes savage politicking and "trashing" of women by rivals.

In order to save her skin in Louisiana, and to give her colleagues in NOW a chance to defend her (the women were split: one group wanted nothing to do with Foat, others defended her), Ginny Foat came up with a new version of herself: she became the symbol of the "battered wife" syndrome. In the version she presented of herself to the court, while married to Jack Sidote she had been a passive wife who felt obliged to follow the commands of her brutal, domineering second husband. Ginny Foat's tactic worked and she finally was acquitted.

But the real thrust of Hawkes's account, and in this, she more than amply proves her point, isn't whether or not Ginny Foat committed murder: Ellen Hawkes is a native Californian, and what she considers lethal is the *combination* of Los Angeles rootlessness, lack of history, and the quick, easy optimism of the feminist movement on the West Coast. One of the most amazing incidents in the book is that Ginny Foat, quite a while before being extradited to Louisiana, apparently mentioned to her NOW sisters during dinner at a Los Angeles restaurant that she had been accused by her exhusband, Jack Sidote, in Nevada, of being his accomplice in several car murders. She told the women that her only involvement in the crime had been helping Sidote clean up pools of blood in their car. In her version she had spent an hour cleaning up the mysterious bloody mess because she had been a meek, subservient wife who had no mind or thoughts of her own—not even enough imagination to inquire of him: was this roast beef, a run-down dog, or a corpse? What is so extraordinary is that her NOW companions also treated her story as an unreal dream-like event that had no relevance to their own dreams and ambitions, and to their agenda for NOW. Hawkes feels it is a cop-out for feminists to hide behind a rhetoric that relieves them from assuming responsibility for their past choices. If Foat had been an exwaitress and go-go girl who had then made a serious commitment to another way of life, and had given real time to becoming educated, of course, she could have gone on to NOW leadership. What made her such a bizarre choice for state president of NOW—(and until the murder charges against her were revealed she had intended to run for national president)—was that she never went through any educative process which would have given her even the slightest qualifications as an enlightened leader of women. All of

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Foat's metamorphoses happened overnight, and were accomplished through changing husbands. I am curious to know—what was the caliber of the women she defeated for that position? And if it was high—why was Ginny Foat elected? *Feminism on Trial* is an extraordinarily original and valuable document of these, our times—and the questions Ellen Hawkes asks of the women's movement are piercing and long overdue.

BARBARA PROBST SOLOMON

POETS AND ANTHOLOGIES

THE HARVARD BOOK OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY. Edited by Helen Vendler. Harvard University Press. $20.00.

Contemporary poetry is seldom discussed with compassion and insight. Helen Vendler enjoys a wide readership, and is generally regarded as the leading critic of our current poets. Does she succeed where others generally fail? I think not, but I also think there are reasons behind her apparent success. Her writing has at least two features which cause it to win favor and influence. First, she is capable of producing very well-turned commonplaces that reassure her audience. Second, she generates thoughtful observations, but seldom explores them with consistency or vigor, so she never wearies her reader with the exercise of tracking the consequences of a truth. These features characterize the opening pages of the Introduction to her anthology of contemporary poetry.

She begins rather weakly with the unexceptional notion that poetry's charm stops with its original language, yet its moral and intellectual "command" can survive translation. (The word "command" suggests the way Vendler heightens her commonplaces with a language that many find forceful.) Then she posits a tension between the "halt" of lyric poetry and the American love of epic scale and sweep. As a controlling idea, this might well have served to anchor the discussion, but instead it is left undeveloped. Such rhetoric as Vendler uses, often cast in a proud and decorous lexicon, leaves the reader feeling challenged and yet reaffirmed, uplifted and stabilized by what our high-school teachers used to call the majesty of poetry.

Vendler also excels in such commanding generalizations in dis-

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cussing individual poets, though often with the same deficiencies revealed by a closer second look. Take the case of Berryman and Roethke. She claims that Berryman "learned the language of the id from Roethke," sound enough as far as it goes and despite its leaving Auden out of the picture, not to mention Berryman's special use of the demotic. But she also claims that Roethke himself "repudiated" that language and then "lived out his life imitating Yeats in bad poems." Many would dispute the blanket negative judgement here, but that aside, what about *Berryman's* imitations of Yeats in his early poetry? And what of Berryman's final years, which produced some strikingly bad poems? Instead of such questions being posed, Berryman's career is made to look like a strategic success, while Roethke's curves sharply downward. All of this is blurred by Vendler's typical concern with poets learning a special idiom and using it in a masterful way. It is, of course, the key focus for any commentator still wed to a New Critical aesthetic, with its rather chaste attitude toward subject matter and truth claims and its complex love of verbal texture and nobilizing formalism. Vendler's main interest is the "excess of distinctive manner" that is "common to all remarkable poetry." But the words "all and "excess" are here not really subject to examination, for such a critic must universalize and sweep us along into an agreement of affections without analysis or dissent. Clearly what is excessively distinctive to some can be simply bad manners to others, or even worse, a willful stylization that conceals a stultification of thought and truth.

So we ought not be surprised that Vendler discusses Blake's "Ah! Sunflower" in her introduction, or cites Roland Barthes without useful illustration, or anchors her sense of lyricism in Keats and Stevens. She makes good points about the change in poetry by women (the broadening of subject matter) and the connections between generations (Moore in Ammons, Auden in Merrill, etcetera), though she credits no other critics who have demonstrated such matters in detail. (The absence of even a selected bibliography of secondary sources helps create the effect of this book as the work of an undisputed authority). By quoting Stevens as saying that "it's only necessary that the writer" understand poetry, Vendler reinforces one of the great commonplaces of post-Romantic literature. At the same time she signals an apparent predilection to draw poetry back behind aristocratic walls into the redoubt of solipsism.

Where does this leave us in regard to her selections of poets and

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poems? As with most anthologies, if not all, reviewing them is often a matter of supplying a checklist of one's omitted favorites. But by beginning with Stevens (born in 1879), under cover of the specious argument that he flowered late, Vendler produces a selection that is at least distinctive and at most rather bizarre. The omissions are sometimes quite noticeable: Olson, of course, and Creeley (not Keatsian enough, I presume, despite a truly "distinctive manner"), and Levertov and Dorn, and many others. Surely skill alone was not a criterion, or we would have been spared some or all of the ten pages of Sexton. Stature, too, must not have been a stringent consideration or else, with due respect, why would she have included Michael Blumenthal or Rita Dove? And balance: well, Ashbery has over twenty-five pages, while Merwin, Snyder, and Pinsky get only five each. Comprehensiveness has also been sacrificed, as we see Pinsky, Bidart, and Glück, but no Robert Hass; Wilbur and Nemerov, but no Hollander, Howard, or Kunitz. Ammons has part of his book-length *Sphere* excerpted, and there's no "Corson's Inlet," the small masterpiece "Center" is missing, and so on. Thus the selections from individual poets might be read as attempts to "correct" the current profile that has developed for each—she claims "readers can see the poets whole"—but I think this is hardly likely. The Lowell selection, for a counter example, is exactly what you would expect. As with post-Romantic poetry, perhaps, this is a selection only the anthologist need understand.

Few would envy the anthologist's agonies, faced with something like a gross parody of life's abundances and denials, but still we must remember that it's a task for which you volunteer. Of course if you choose, as Vendler did, to have "fewer poets, and represent them by more poems, rather than have more poets with fewer poems each," then you not only display your own taste but also make a bid to influence the making of the canon. With such a bid your assumptions become subject to close scrutiny and severe counter-judgement. Doubtlessly, Vendler is assured her judgement and taste are impeccable. But by the rules of the American tradition, and on the basis of this particular anthology, they are far from unassailable.

CHARLES MOLESWORTH

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THE WILL TO POWER

NIETZSCHE: LIFE AS LITERATURE. By Alexander Nehamas. Harvard University Press. $17.50.

This is one of the best books published on Nietzsche in the vogue that the philosopher has recently enjoyed. It is, in spite of its title, not a biography. Nor does its author attempt to interpret the whole Nietzschean corpus. Instead, Nehamas deals with a few of Nietzsche's most important (and controversial) ideas in detail: his attack upon morality, his perspectivism (theory of knowledge as interpretation), the will to power, eternal recurrence, and so on. Surprisingly enough, Nehamas has something new to say cn each of these topics, although he often presents it as corrective commentary upon other writers. Nehamas treats Nietzsche's controversial ideas in discrete essay-chapters, but he attempts to resolve their paradoxes and conceptual difficulties within a general theory of Nietzsche's authorship. This is most original.

Nehamas argues that "Nietzsche's writing, and his thinking, is *essentially* hyperbolic," by which he means that Nietzsche made quite conscious and systematic use of hyperbole in his later works. He convincingly suggests that the great attention that has been paid to Nietzsche's aphoristic writings is due to the fact that hyperbole works so well in aphorism. But his suggestion may also explain why Nietzsche's other styles have been so difficult for many readers to appreciate: the mock-biblical narrative of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, for example, or the self-congratulatory commentary of *Ecce Homo*. One simply does not expect hyperbole in philosophic fiction or autobiography. But why would Nietzsche use hyperbole so systematically? And why did he adopt so many styles? According to Nehamas, the answer is entwined in Nietzsche's perspectivism.

What Nehamas (and other analytic philosophers) call Nietzsche's perspectivism is the thesis that there is no truth, only interpretation, and no "facts" or objective standards against which various interpretations could be measured. According to Nietzsche, "facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretation." Of course Nietzsche's view is more interesting than that. In his effort to undermine truth, Nietzsche attacks science itself and goes on to assert that the very will to truth and knowledge is a special case of a deeper will to ignorance. And yet he did not hold that all interpretations are

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equally valuable. But without expounding Neitzsche's complex view myself or even trying to establish a better term for it than perspectivism, I can report that Nehamas treats it in genuinely dialectical fashion—as he does all of the ideas he discusses. He makes each objection to Nietzsche's perspectivism so plausible that it seems he is about to conclude that the idea must be given up as contradictory, only then to find that Nietzsche had a more sophisticated position that he ultimately can defend.

One of the most important objections characterizes Nietzsche's position:

> . . . as the thesis (P) that every view is an interpretation. Now it appears that if (P) is true, and if every view is in fact an interpretation, this would apply to (P) itself. In that case (P) also turns out to be an interpretation, and (P) seems to have refuted itself.

This is important, of course, since it seems to undermine much of what Nietzsche wrote. How could he expect his readers to accept his views about moral values, for instance, if by his own argument they can be only his interpretations? And why, if he knew that whatever he should write would be nothing more than his interpretation, did he bother to publish his arguments? Nehamas exposes a logical lapse in this objection; it is a demonstration that, in the interest of suspense, I leave the reader to find in the book.

More importantly, however, Nehamas shows that Nietzsche, while contending for his views, did not advance them as true in the same sense as earlier philosophers did. According to Nehamas:

> . . . in admitting its own status as interpretation, [Nietzsche's] perspective does not require that it be accepted. It concedes that no one is obliged to believe it.

The question then becomes, how could Nietzsche reveal the status of his views as interpretations while arguing energetically for their correctness? For example, Nietzsche attacks morality and asceticism in very certain terms, hardly compatible with his declared perspectivism. In *The Genealogy of Morals* he asserts that asceticism is a "lie," and he advances his genealogical interpretation of the history of morality, the famous argument that the moral values of good and evil are transpositions of aristocratic values of good and bad, as the scientific truth.

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But Nehamas is a patient reader. He notices that in the same essay in which Nietzsche disparages asceticism, he also contends that the faith in truth is an aspect of the ascetic ideal. For Nietzsche, the very methods he employs to expose asceticism, namely, science and historiography, are tainted with the values they seem to discredit. So Nietzsche could not rest at this point in his critique of morality. Nehamas comments:

> Nietzsche knows these difficulties. This is why he denies that science is the ultimate enemy of the ascetic ideal and why he writes that "the ascetic ideal has at present only *one* kind of real enemy capable of *harming* it: the comedians of this ideal—for they arouse mistrust in it." Nietzsche tries to be such a comedian.

Nehamas shows that Nietzsche was aware of his paradoxical situation. He could put forward his views only as though he believed them, and he had to believe them in order to put them forward as he did. But, Nehamas contends, he could distance himself from his own claims to truth by casting his work in hyperbole. To paraphrase the definition of this trope, Nietzsche exaggerated in order not to be taken too literally.

Nietzsche called constant attention to the author-function in his later books, according to Nehamas, in order to keep ever before his readers that his views were not *the* truth, but the truth of *someone*. Hyperbole was his primary device for calling attention to the author, calling the author into question, and making the author bizarre. But repeated shifts of style make it seem that his books have various authors, all somewhat bizarre. In fact, Nietzsche created the authors of his books as though they were literary characters themselves. This permitted him to distance himself from the otherwise strident truth-claims of his books. The truth claims reflect upon the fictive authors, who constantly remind us of their idiosyncrasy. Thus Nietzsche made his aggressive argumentation compatible with his theory of knowledge as interpretation.

This is an interpretation never before proposed: that Nietzsche deliberately caricatured himself. With hyperbole he made himself the comedian of moral values, and ultimately the comedian of truth. Unfortunately, I think, Nehamas makes rather limited use of his idea of Nietzsche as clown. He wants only to defend Nietzsche's difficult ideas from charges of contradiction and unwitting paradox, or to show that Nietzsche was aware of the difficulties involved in his positions.

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Of course, Nehamas appreciates that Nietzsche also put himself forward as a model in some unusual sense. But he does not directly confront the apparent paradox in this aphorism from *The Gay Science* (Book III, #255):

> A: "What? You want no one to emulate you?"
> B: "I don't want anyone to imitate me. I want everyone to fashion his own ideal, as I do."
> A: "So?"

The "authors" of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *Ecce Homo* both offer themselves as models who can be emulated only by not emulating them. This is a very difficult topic, but one that might have been illuminated by Nehamas's interpretation of Nietzsche's hyperbolic authorship. That he does not attempt this systematically is my principal criticism.

Nietzsche knew his works were difficult. Difficulty was part of his project. But he hoped to have readers who would read him:

> . . . *well*, that is to say . . . slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors open, with delicate eyes and fingers.

In my opinion no one has read Nietzsche more carefully than Nehamas. This accounts, I think, for the dialectical and somewhat fragmented shape of this book. *Nietzsche* is sometimes difficult too. And justifiably so. But henceforth it will be foolish to write on the subjects treated here without reading *this* book well.

CARL PLETSCH

THE PHYSICAL FORCES

PERFECT SYMMETRY. THE SEARCH FOR THE BEGINNING OF TIME. By Heinz R. Pagels. Simon and Schuster. $18.95.

Perfect Symmetry describes the two currently most exciting subfields of physics. Pagels's title is somewhat misleading, for "perfect symmetry" refers to the concept that the four known forces (gravitation, electromagnetic, strong nuclear, and weak force) may have

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been unified under conditions existing at the birth of the universe—a unification somewhat analogous to that of electricity, magnetism, and light, which were once thought to be separate phenomena and are now viewed as different aspects of electromagnetic radiation. The subtitle, *The Search for the Beginning of Time*, better represents the text, since half the book gives an up-to-the-minute account of cosmology (a down-to-a-10^{-35} second account—.00000000000000000000000000000001—would be more accurate); the other half gives an equally up-to-date account of elementary particle physics. The two are treated in tandem, as synthesis takes the form of symbiosis: particle physics sheds light on the origin of the universe, while cosmology helps explain the laws of physics.

Pagels begins with a history of astronomy. History, irrelevant for most of physics, is appropriate to cosmology, for in order to learn about origins, one must study evolution, and such questions as how galaxies form cannot be answered in the laboratory. The history reveals that more discoveries were made during recent decades than in previous centuries, for three reasons: the technology employed in observation made great advances; quantum physics provided a foundation for modern astrophysics; and computers enabled observers to do massive data processing and astrophysicists to solve equations describing multitudes of interactions. Pagels goes on to describe pulsars, quasars and black holes, material sufficiently dramatic to engage us without extraterrestrial effort on the part of the author.

In the second part of the book, on particle physics, where the material is abstract, Pagels, a particle physicist himself, is most effective. In this highly mathematical discipline, understanding consists not of visualizing but of learning mathematical properties of interactions. To explain to the general public what it really cannot understand, Pagels employs the customary tool of scientist-writers, the analogy. To indicate how the once unified four forces separated as a result of "symmetry breaking," for instance, he uses Nobel laureate Abdus Salam's analogy: a round table set with salad plates between dinner plates is perfectly symmetric until one guest selects a salad either to the right or to the left. Once the choice is made, the symmetry is broken, and the other guests must follow suit, or some salads will remain untouched while others will be objects of dispute.

Further on, Pagels identifies the many particles that we have read about in the newspapers and arranges them in tables in line with their functions. And he discusses the Grand Unified Theories which, although they leave problems unsolved, are appealing insofar

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as they hold that the proliferation of particles is superficial and "all the gluons as well as the quarks and leptons may simply be viewed as components of a few unifying fields."

When names of particles are seen together with such cosmological terms as "cannibal" and "missionary" galaxies, the reader can get the impression that scientific humor borders on the precious, though gluon does seem an appropriate designation for a particle that binds, and Big Bang was coined derisively by the proponent of a rival theory. However, also included in the book is the following stellar example of what could be termed analytical humor: According to some theories, the proton is not stable but decays in about 10^{31} years, 10000000000000000000000000000000,—an electrifying prediction, and one which would distinguish between correct and incorrect theories. Experiments to detect the decay are incredibly delicate and, to minimize background disturbance, are performed in mines or in the Mont Blanc Tunnel. One of the experimenters, Maurice Goldhaber, wittily remarked. "We know in our bones" that the lifetime of the proton exceeds 10^{16} years—a remark that had to be preceded by the mental multiplication of the number of protons in the human body by the decay rate for lifetimes *less* than 10^{16} years, which yields an answer of tens of thousands of decays per second. This would mean that human beings would constitute health hazards. (So far, no decays have been detected.)

Pagels brought particle physics and cosmology under one roof because the largest particle accelerators can, in effect, produce conditions that existed when the universe was one-billionth of a second old. Earlier times cannot be reproduced in accelerators. Therefore, to learn how the universe originated, and from what—if from anything—scientists must "look to the 'big accelerator in the sky'. . . . The whole universe becomes an experiment for deducing the ultimate laws of matter . . . integrating the science of the smallest things we know—the quanta—with that of the largest—the cosmos." And Heinz Pagels has integrated the two in *Perfect Symmetry*.

GRACE MARMOR SPRUCH

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LETTERS

To the Editor:

In response to Peter Shaw's "The Politics of Deconstruction" (*PR* 2, 1986), I would like to make a few simple remarks: 1) Deconstruction is not a trend. It is not an ephemeral "literary orthodoxy" any more than Hegelianism was one hundred years ago. Hegel is still with us, and I presume Derrida will still be with us for a long time. Deconstruction may be reread, misappropriated, or dismissed, but it will not be buried. Only those ignorant of the history of philosophical movements believe that time will assuage the professional insecurities deconstruction triggers in hostile critics. 2) Deconstruction does not promote the "dismissal of traditional Western thought." Unless Mr. Shaw thinks that Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger all belong on the margins of Western culture, he must be forced to place Derrida, who writes on them extensively and never dismissively, in a direct line of philosophical inheritance. 3) Deconstruction did not originate in radical politics. For Shaw to claim that political radicalism is "the movement's most significant feature" is preposterous enough to sound more like wish-fulfillment than a report on "the true nature of the phenomenon set before" him. Shaw borrows Eagleton's suspect claim that deconstruction took its impetus from the student riots of 1968. But in fact, Derrida's first formulations of deconstruction preceded the riots by a decade. He published several programmatic essays in the early sixties and reached a mature, comprehensive exposition by 1966. 4) Deconstruction does not perform "the replacement of rationality with subjectivity." First of all, rationality and subjectivity do not exclude one another. Secondly, Derrida is not a subjectivist. His essay *Speech and Phenomena* explicitly undermines the most influential school of subjectivism of our time: Husserlian phenomenology. Either Mr. Shaw has not read this book, perhaps Derrida's most important, or he misunderstands his own terminology. 5) Shaw's claim that "most writing done under the names of poststructuralism and deconstruction concerns itself very little with the act of analysis itself" again betrays an alarming ignorance of poststructuralist discourse. Apparently, Shaw has relied on watered-down popularizations of deconstruction by Culler, Leitch, Eagleton, et al, which, indeed, concern themselves with theory alone. But if Shaw realizes that the first book-length deconstruction in this country was neither an introduction to nor an apology for Derridean theory but rather a close reading of William Carlos Williams's poetry and poetics (*The Inverted Bell*, by Joseph N. Riddel, an ingenious ex-New Critic whose later publications on American literature are deconstructive readings focussed relentlessly upon the texts under analysis) and that

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virtually all of Derrida's theoretical writings are grounded in scrupulous close readings of other texts, Shaw would realize that deconstruction as a theory is eminently practical in its applications. Contrary to what Shaw says, deconstruction always lives through a parasitic analysis of literature and philosophy, while, at the same time, it incorporate a self-commentary upon its own analytic methods.

And now to Shaw's argument. His title refers to the politics of deconstruction, but does he specify what kind of politics? Only to say that deconstruction is "radical," but what does that tell us? His reference to "the problem of defining who [or what] is a deconstructionist" (Derrida is, and may be looked at, for provisional purposes, as its founder) may be turned upon his own article. As to informing me of the politics of deconstruction, Shaw has failed. As to showing himself as a skillful defender or attacker of deconstructive writings, Shaw has failed. If deconstruction is a fascist orthodoxy today, and if I am one of its faithful, then I charge him with violating its only commandment: familiarity with the written word.

Mark Bauerlein
Los Angeles, California

Peter Shaw replies:

Mark Bauerlein's quarrel is not with me but with the deconstructionists themselves. They are the ones who trace the movement to "radical" politics, and who fail to specify what they mean by this term. Bauerlein challenges only one formulation of my own, and then offers but a single exception to what I would still maintain, namely that "most writing done under the names of poststructuralism and deconstruction neglects close readings." (The book he cites, by the way, calls itself "a study in 'poetics', as distinguished from a study of poetry.")

Peter Shaw
New York, New York

To the Editor:

I am very much disappointed in *Partisan Review* 3, 1986. Lionel Abel's blurb "Simone de Beauvoir" is written by a contemporary man who still views woman as the "other" sex—equal but separate. It is disheartening to see this blatant sexism in a highbrow, scholarly journal: "Simone was a man's gal."

In Abel's quotation of Milton, I wondered if Abel ever suspected Milton's writing to be unthoughtful of woman as a total person: "He for God only, she for God in him." As de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*: "Men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit." I want someone to write of de Beauvoir as Hayman wrote of Jean-Paul Sartre: ". . . his genius lies in the totality of his work con-

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sidered as 'the totality of the manifestation of the person'."

It is a cheap shot at a necessary acknowledgment to Sartre's peer to publish only a couple of paragraphs on de Beauvoir and fifteen pages on Jean-Paul Sartre in the very same issue.

Finally, I argue that Lionel Abel did not read *The Second Sex.*

Pauline Facciano-Portuguez
Berkeley, California

Lionel Abel replies:

I admit to having written provocatively about Simone de Beauvoir, and from Ms. Pauline Facciano-Portuguez's letter, I seem to have drawn blood.

But I must insist here that I knew Simone well, translated her, wrote in her favor, liked her a lot, and read *The Second Sex* in Paris, as it appeared in *Les temps modernes.* In answer to Facciano-Portuguez's suggestion that I did not read it at all, I shall again rely on a line from Milton, whom I am still reading with pleasure even though he is being charged with sexism. The line from *Paradise Lost* is Lucifer's reply to an angel dispatched by the Lord (who was against a summit with the Empire of Evil): "Not to know me argues thyself unknown."

Lionel Abel
New York, New York

To the Editor:

Your readers may be confused about the authorship of the poem, "The Queen of the Metropolitan Museum" (*PR* 4, 1986), printed under the name of David Shapiro. Since 1965, I have published many books under that name, some volumes of poetry, but I am not the author of that poem. I have spoken to the author of the poem, who informs me that his name is David Harry Shapiro, born 1942, and that it is his first published poem. Bibliographers, beware.

David Joel Shapiro

Bronx, NY

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